DOUBLE ISSUE

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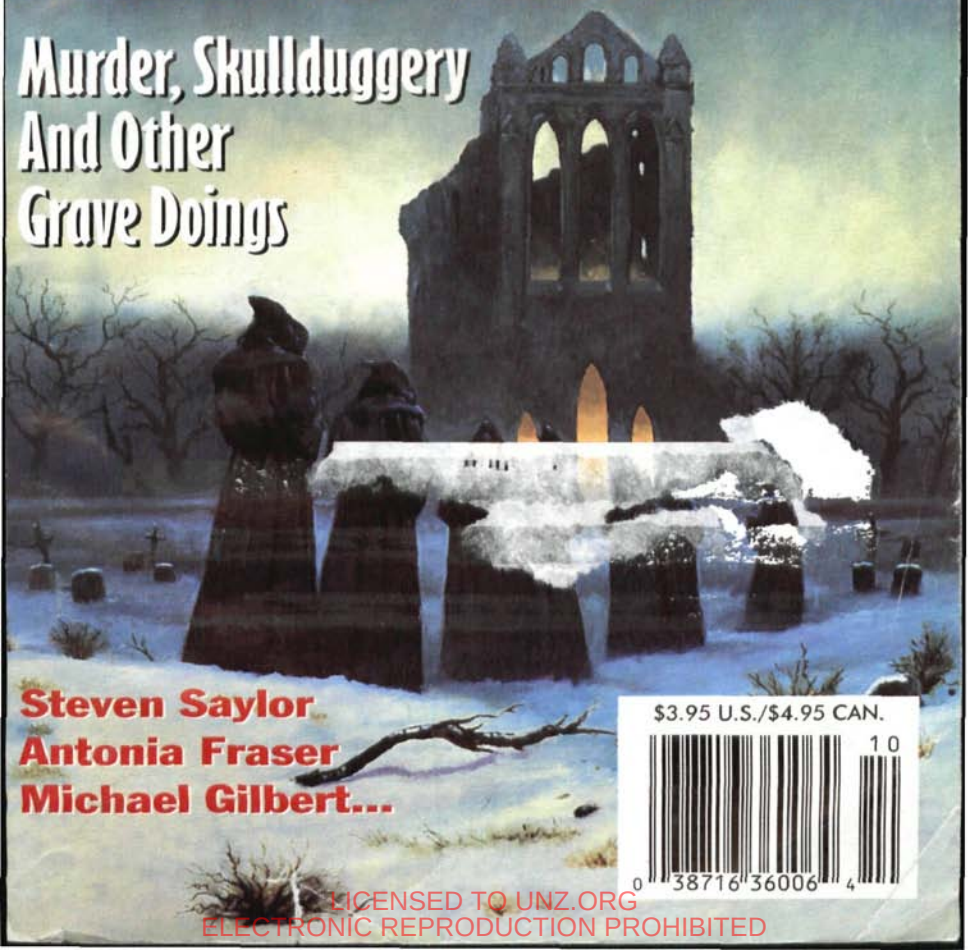

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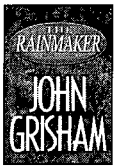

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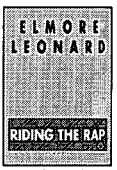

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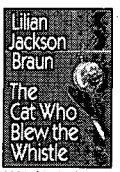

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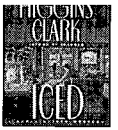

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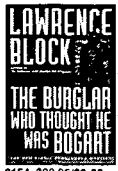

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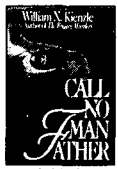

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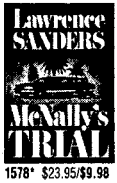

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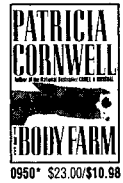

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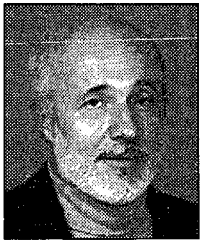

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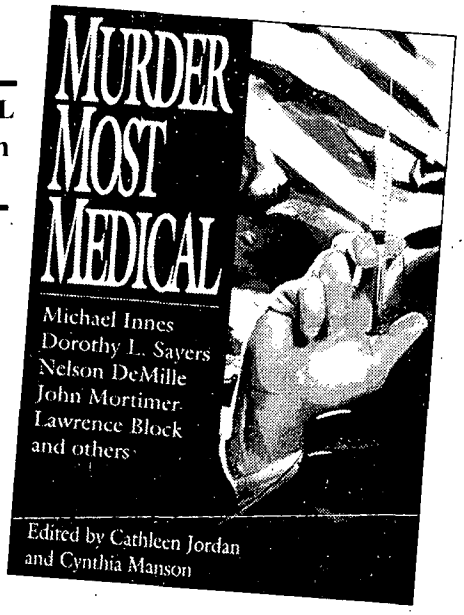
PRESCRIPTION FOR DEATH

MURDER MOST MEDICAL
Edited by Cathleen Jordan and Cynthia Manson



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The Big Five-O

by Gillian Linscott

We met for the first time in ten years at a gallery opening.

"Happy birthday," I said.

She'd had her back to me until then, talking to a bearded man in denims. An elegant back in a blazer of black, sinuous silk, legs swathed in soft fuchsia-coloured pants in the same material. Silk spun by happy worms, naturally. She whirled round, spilling her Australian Sauvignon over poor denims. There was alarm on her face as she turned, but when she saw me it gave place to the familiar wide-mouthed smile. The smile had a question in it, eyebrows arched.

A journalist as well as a fiction writer, Gillian Linscott's career has ranged from reporting chip-pan fires in Bootle, England to street riots in Belfast. Her previous incarnations include civil servant, market gardener, playwright, and parliamentary radio reporter. Exotic locations often figure in her fiction, as in passages from this new story. ¶

I explained: "Two days ago."

"You remembered?"

She detached herself from the other man and stepped round a piece of jagged metal on a plinth.

"Of course. It's only five days from my own. Forty-seven last Tuesday."

"It's been such ages, Peter. . . ."

"That piece about you in the *Observer* got it wrong. It said you were forty-three."

They'd interviewed her because she was a candidate for Businesswoman of the Year award, importing fine fabrics from the Third World in a typically deft combination of profit, travel, and altruism. She wrinkled her suntanned nose. "Journalists."

* * *

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Elbowed and jostled by people ranging for refills, we talked in the way you do talk after ten years, briefly regretting one broken marriage apiece and registering, almost as briefly, that we now each had more satisfactory and less formal arrangements in their places. She was candid about the bankruptcy of an earlier business venture and about her one son, now an unpromising nineteen and pretending to be an actor in Chicago of all places, would you believe?

"And you?"

"Much as usual."

She laughed.

"Your very successful usual."

We talked about Washington, Tokyo, mutual acquaintances. We exchanged London telephone numbers and addresses, card for card. I invited her to dinner afterwards but she had an appointment with some Lapps who wove birch bark. It was only when she'd phoned for a taxi and we were hovering by the door waiting for it that she came out with her question, apparently casually.

"Do you see anything of Welbrand these days?"

She turned away from me as she asked, pretending to look at a chromium thing in the window, but her shoulders had gone tense under the silk.

"Not for years. How about you?"

She shook her head. The taxi arrived, she darted into it, and that was that.

Next year, on her forty-eighth birthday and five days after mine, I rang and invited her to dinner. It was an impulse. I'd hardly expected her to be in London, let alone free, but after a gasp of surprise she said yes. Yes, let's. We met at a little French place in Charlotte Street. We ate salmon fillets in a sauce of sorrel and lemon grass, drank Chablis, with a lime soufflé to follow. She wore a loose dress in a material that seemed to change colour with every movement she made, like the feathers on a pigeon's neck. We talked about one of her recent journeys, to Afghanistan of all places.

"There's this wonderful family—more of a small tribe. They've just gone on weaving their cloth through the whole thing, invasion, civil war, the lot. And it's beautiful, quite beautiful. I bought all they'd sell me."

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* * *

"Like the squid?"

She looked at me, surprised, then laughed. It was a joke from a long way back, from the time when the three of us were sitting on the headland of some Greek island in the summer after we finished at university, watching the fishermen slapping dead squid down on the rocks to make them tender. Overconfident in her few sentences of Greek, she'd undertaken to buy some to cook for our supper and come back followed by a grinning fisherman stumbling under the weight of a basket-load, kilos and kilos of them. Welbrand and I teased her about it for the rest of that long summer. When we'd finished laughing, she sipped at her glass of armagnac and went quiet for a while.

Then:

"It's funny. Just before you rang I was thinking about Welbrand."

"Ah, Welbrand."

"What do you suppose he's doing now?"

"About twenty years in some exotic prison."

"Seriously."

"Even seriously, you have to admit that prison's about as likely as anything else with Welbrand. Or a mercenary somewhere, perhaps."

"Wouldn't he be too old for a mercenary?"

She was right, of course, but somehow I couldn't imagine Welbrand growing older. I said the last news I'd had about him was from a friend who'd heard he was teaching in Cumbria.

"Oh, that was ten years ago at least. More. Anyway, it didn't last. I had a letter from him soon after that postmarked Amsterdam. He claimed he'd been thrown out for doing Kerouac with the sixth form instead of Shakespeare."

More coffee arrived.

"Peter, do you remember that last night on Andros before we went back to England?"

"I remember we got out of our minds on Moroccan and some vile wine."

"I mean, do you remember the pact?"

I found myself looking into her eyes. They were grey and hard, much harder than the soft shifting colours of her dress.

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"You do remember, don't you? About what we were going to do when we were fifty."

I said nothing.

"Yes, you do remember."

The certainty in her voice seemed to take the temperature down by several degrees. She went on talking in a voice lower and more urgent than the one she'd used for our restaurant chatter.

"There was this science fiction book he'd been reading, you remember, about this planet where people killed themselves as soon as they stopped having new ideas."

"M. P. Shiel, I think."

No good pretending that I didn't remember.

"Anyway, we agreed that was the way we should live our lives, a continuous blaze of ideas and actions, and as soon as we felt it dying down we should kill ourselves."

I remembered a salty fire of driftwood crackling on the sand and the Aegean shifting itself gently in the darkness a few yards away. I remembered the bite of sharp wine and woodsmoke at the back of my throat and two faces in the firelight, hers like something let out from the temple of an archaic goddess, Welbrand's eyes looking as if the reflection of the flames was burning them back and back into their sockets.

"He said by fifty, if not before. Probably it would come well before that, but by fifty we'd have no excuse for not knowing."

"A typically Welbrand idea."

"You swore too, in blood and salt and wine."

A knife blade in the firelight. Welbrand's eyes as he flicked it across my forearm, then hers, then his own, delicately, so that the soft skin just parted and enough blood ran. Then the three of us sucking from each other's arms the taste of blood and salt and falling in a tangled heap on the sand so that it was difficult to tell where one body ended and another began. I looked at her across the restaurant table and saw that movement and colour had come back into her eyes.

"Yes, I swore too."

"How naive we were. As if you gave up actions or ideas because of the date on a calendar. I feel I've got more energy and ideas now than I've ever had, don't you?"

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I forget what I answered, but the atmosphere lightened. We went back to speculating about what Welbrand might be doing. She wondered if we'd even recognise him.

"He might be anyone. He might have been there with my tribesmen in Afghanistan, or standing next to you in the taxi queue at Heathrow. For all we know he might be that waiter over there."

She gave a little jerk of the shoulder towards the waiter standing by the doors to the kitchen. He was certainly about the right height and colouring for Welbrand, with a drooping moustache that looked false but probably wasn't. At that stage of the dinner it set us both laughing until she worried that the waiter might think we were laughing at him. When he came over to offer more coffee she made a point of being specially nice to him and insisted that I should leave a tip well over the normal rate. She made no fuss about letting me pay the bill, but as we went out she insisted:

"Next year it's my turn, and it's your birthday we'll celebrate."

It was a good year for me, as if the memory we'd raised of that summer nearly thirty years ago had brought back with it some of the confidence and trapeze-poise of being young. If I'd met Welbrand that year, I'd have laughed at him. And yet, in spite of having more than enough to do, I somehow made sure I was in London in the week of my forty-ninth birthday. Two days before it, she rang.

"You remembered? There's this rather good Armenian place I found in Camden Town." She named an address. "Shall we meet there? Is eight o'clock all right?"

There was a lack of warmth in her voice, almost sharpness. I decided that must be because she was phoning from her office.

I was there before eight, drinking dry sherry in an anteroom pavilioned in hangings of ivory- and copper-coloured damask, probably bought from her firm. She arrived ten minutes late in a clattering of doors and apologies.

"Peter darling, do forgive me. Happy birthday."

Her voice was too loud. She was wearing a beige linen suit and brown silk blouse that accentuated sharp angles in her face, a wariness in her eyes. Over the spicy little dishes they served as a first course, I asked if she'd been working too hard.

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"Yes. No . . . I don't know. This damned recession. You think you're riding it, but it takes . . . you know."

She waved a gold-chained hand, took a gulp of wine. I was sure that whatever was worrying her was more than financial. I asked after her partner. Oh, he was fine. I really must meet him one day. And mine? Fine also, and currently doing some coaching in Paris. Yes, when she was next in London we must make up a foursome. There was something not quite right about the way she was focussing. Sometimes her eyes would be fixed on mine very intently then they'd slide away, around the room and back towards the door.

A second bottle of wine arrived with the main course. She filled our glasses too full.

"To your birthday, Peter. How does it feel to be forty-nine?"

"You'll know in five days."

"It's nonsense, isn't it? As if one feels any different just because . . ." She waited to be interrupted, fork poised in the air like a spindle of the Fates. I waited too. When she did begin speaking again the words poured out in a mumble so that I had to lean across the table to catch what she was saying.

"Only we do change, don't we? We're not the same people we were twenty years ago. We're not even the same people we were yesterday. I mean, you do change between one birthday and the next, of course you do, so why shouldn't it be on one particular day that you . . . oh."

A muffled wail. She threw her fork down on the tablecloth. A waiter glanced at us and away again, another waiter with another moustache. I put my hand over hers, made her look at me.

"You're talking as if change must always be for the worse."

"Can you honestly look around you and say that it isn't? Can you feel your own mind, your own body, going slow and pulpy and say that it isn't?"

We were both of us, mentally and physically, a long way from being slow and pulpy. I told her so. She smiled, picked up her fork, and began eating again, but stopped after a few mouthfuls.

"Peter, you remember we talked about Welbrand last year?"

"Of course."

"I . . . I think I've seen him. Several times."

"Where?"

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"Once in a hotel lobby in Glasgow, once in Regents Park with some children. Then, just last week, I came out of our front door and there he was feeding a parking meter across the road."

"Did you go over and speak to him?"

"No."

"Because you weren't sure?"

"Because I was nearly sure he wasn't."

She stared at me, wide-eyed.

"You thought he was but you're nearly sure he wasn't?"

"Please don't laugh at me. I'm trying to explain. I don't really think it was Welbrand any of the three times. But it so nearly could have been that I felt he couldn't be far away, just around the corner out of sight."

"Not logical."

"Of course not logical. But it's going to happen all the same. He knows what year it is as well as we do."

She saw something in my eyes and pounced.

"It's happened to you too, hasn't it?"

"In a way, yes."

"Where?"

"Paris. You know the Place de Trocadero, all those Algerians selling beads and mechanical birds and so on? One of them turned round suddenly and stared at me and he wasn't an Algerian at all. For a moment I could have sworn it was Welbrand and he'd expected me to be there."

"You didn't say anything either?"

"No."

The waiter came to inquire if we'd finished and reproachfully removed half-full plates.

"That oath," she said, "do you remember the rest of it?"

I'd thought about this beforehand and had decided to deny it, to say that we were all too high and too drunk that evening to remember all that we'd said. But the denial wouldn't come when I needed it. She leaned towards me until our foreheads were almost touching.

"You remember, if we got to fifty and hadn't killed ourselves, what we'd do."

"There's no point . . . "

"That we'd kill each other."

She sat back and looked at me, a little smile on her face.

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"Welbrand meant it."

"Perhaps he did, but he'll have grown up since then too."

"And don't think he'll have changed. Anyway, he's right, isn't he? We've none of us done what we wanted to then."

I started to speak. She waved at me to be quiet.

"I know what you're going to say. Creative careers, friends, family, and so on. But it's not what we'd have settled for then."

"Don't you think that Welbrand will have settled for much the same things wherever he is, or would like to if he hasn't?"

"No."

She said it quite flatly. I felt angry both with her and this superior Welbrand she was setting in judgement over us.

"Fat, forty-nine, and director of a double-glazing firm, that's what Welbrand might be now."

She smiled as if she knew better, making me even more angry.

"So he's lurking out there somewhere, is he, planning to kill both of us when we get to fifty, then kill himself because we couldn't make the world do backflips for us? Is that what you think?"

"Yes," she said, very quietly. "Yes, that is what I think. And you think it too, Peter."

Suddenly, artificially bright, she poured the last of the wine into our glasses, asked the waiter for the bill. When it arrived she scrabbled in her big leather shoulder bag for her wallet of cards.

"Look."

Her hand was in her bag, her eyes on me. I looked in the bag, expecting some scrap of fabric she'd collected from God knows where, and saw the silver glint of a small revolver. When she was sure I'd seen it, she tucked a scarf over it and fished out her card wallet.

"How long have you been carrying that around?"

"Just this week. A friend got it for me."

"Is it licensed?"

Her glance told me not to be silly.

"You know why I got it?"

"Welbrand?"

She nodded.

"I could get one for you, if you like. It costs, of course, and . . . "

"No."

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She shrugged, smiled up at the waiter, and put a card on the plate beside the bill.

We decided to walk back to Camden High Road and get taxis, but found ourselves wandering half-lost along side streets in the dusk, past piles of black plastic bags and cardboard cartons, snatches of canned bouzouki music from Greek-Cypriot restaurants. I was aware of the leather bag swinging between us, bumping against us.

"He was mad, you realise? We knew that at the time."

"Perhaps we were mad too."

"We were just visiting mad. He lived there."

My envy stirred again, as at a superior address.

"Wouldn't you say that we've probably done more with our lives than Welbrand—wherever he is?"

She swung in front of me on the pavement and made me stop walking.

"Peter, can you honestly say you're everything you ever dreamed of being?"

"Of course not. Neither can you. Nobody can."

"Yes, but why do we settle for that so easily? Why aren't we inconsolable?"

A pair of kids in leathers coming out of a cafe looked at us with curiosity. We walked on slowly.

"A bad business that would be," I said, "a world of middle-aged inconsolables."

"Yes. That's why we swore what we did."

Anger was building up inside me. I knew that if I said anything it would probably be so hurtful to her that we'd never see each other again. At the next street corner she said we must go and find our taxis. And yet it struck me that she, who knew this part of London better than I did, was leading us by the most roundabout route possible, past every cul-de-sac and narrow alleyway on that side of Camden Town.

I said: "You're looking for him, aren't you?"

A catch of breath.

"Who?"

"You've got a gun in your bag and yet you think you're giving him a chance to find you. To find us."

"No."

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I drew away from her and walked on fast. She came after me.

"Peter, wait."

I waited.

"It's true . . . in a way."

Four steps of hers, three of mine, side by side.

"In a way I do want him to find me."

By the light of the next restaurant window I saw that she was crying. She let me take us, by the most direct route, back to the High Road. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to happen. A heavy meeting today with the accountants . . . I didn't mean to spoil your evening."

No need to worry, I said.

"I'm thinking of selling the firm. Keeping a consultancy, of course."

We discussed the pros and cons of that while semaphoring at taxis. One did a U-turn and came towards us.

"I'll see you home."

"Of course not. I'll be fine now. Your turn next year."

It took a second for me to understand that she was talking about our birthdays, as if the last half-hour hadn't happened.

"All right," I said, making a joke of it, "somewhere where Welbrand won't find us."

I needed to say his name. She watched the taxi gliding towards us as if she hadn't heard. But as I opened the door for her she said:

"I'll think of somewhere. I'll let you know. All right?"

Then she slammed the door and was gone before I could answer.

All the confidence that had come back to me since we talked about the night on the island lasted through the next year. Everything was allowed. I took risks, professional and personal, and they turned out well because I never doubted they would. There was something extra too since that night in Camden Town—a sense of urgency that came back from long ago like a lost tune. Not that unhappy, fidgeting urgency that comes from fearing things are out of control, but a surge like riding a wave of seeing so much to do and feeling the power to do it.

"What are you on, Peter?" a colleague asked me one day. He was only half joking.

"Middle-age," I said.

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I'd no intention of explaining to him that I'd just recovered from an illness that had been with me for all my adult life. The name of it was envy. Envy of Welbrand. I hadn't admitted it to myself until that night of my forty-ninth birthday in Camden Town when she went looking for him along small streets and up alleyways, with a gun in her bag in case he found her first. Admitting it had been the cure. My friends gave me a dinner on my fiftieth birthday and Gina came over from Paris. In my thank-you speech I told them that I'd never enjoyed a year more than my fiftieth. I meant it.

Three days later, after I'd got back from seeing Gina off at Heathrow, the phone rang.

"Peter?"

Her voice, a little defensive.

"Did you expect to hear from me?"

"Of course. It's your birthday the day after tomorrow."

"Are we meeting?"

"Yes. You said you'd think of somewhere."

I was expecting her to name some out-of-the-way restaurant.

A hesitation, then: "I'll bring the food, you see to the drink."

"Where are we going?"

"I'll call for you at half-past seven, okay?"

She rang off, without waiting for my answer, as if scared that the call might be traced.

Two days later, at twenty minutes past seven, I watched as her taxi drew up. Before she could get out I was across the pavement, champagne in the chiller bag, Saint Emilion in the carrier.

"Peter darling."

She sounded breathless, nervy. She was wearing black trousers, a white frilled shirt with a black bolero jacket, black low-heeled shoes. I knew she must have chosen it as a good outfit for running in and felt my heart thumping. The year had not been kind to her. There were more lines round her eyes and lips. As the taxi drew away from the kerb she turned sideways on the backseat to stare at me.

"You look well, Peter."

"So do you. Happy birthday."

I'd decided not to ask where we were going. There was a blanket folded beside her and a new wicker picnic hamper. It had

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been a warm day, but with the sun on its way down the evening was cooling fast.

"Have you seen him?"

Her question sounded entirely businesslike.

"No. Have you?"

She nodded twice, then looked away.

The taxi worked its way eastward through the traffic. The leather bag, the same one as last year, was looped over her shoulder and her hand never left it. We drove through Highgate, then stopped when there were trees and dusk on our left and the thin, high voices of people calling to dogs.

"Picnic on the Heath?"

She got out, with the hamper and shoulder bag. I paid the driver and followed with the blanket and drink. She waited for me impatiently, then led the way along the path that curves upwards across the open Heath towards Highgate Ponds. The dusk was clotting. There was the smell of crushed grass all round us but the air was cool.

I said: "Why don't we just have a drink out here then go to a restaurant? There's a Peruvian place in Highgate where . . ."

"No."

Where all the waiters would look like Welbrand, I supposed. I moved up beside her and we walked fast, like people with an appointment to keep.

We stopped by a locked gate in a clump of bushes. She said: "We'll have to climb over it," and did it almost as neatly and easily as a student, giving me the picnic basket to hold, but not her shoulder bag. I followed and we went down the path between the bushes in single file. There was nobody at the pool. The water was flat and white in the dusk, with a few ducks at the edges. If anybody needed a hiding place, there were a dozen of them, in the bushes, behind the changing huts, enough for a platoon of Welbrands. I looked at her, expecting her to become aware of that and take us back to the lights and traffic. Instead, in her flat pumps, she started to climb the ladder to the diving boards.

"Up there?"

"Bring the things."

I followed, encumbered by bags and baskets. She walked along the diving platform about ten feet above the water and sat down, her feet over the edge.

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"Come and sit next to me."

She was breathing fast. I sat.

"If he comes up the steps after us we can stamp on his fingers. Is that the idea?"

"I feel safer high up, where I can see."

"You haven't been like this all year, have you?"

"No. Only these last few days. I've been so sure that he's going to find me. If I can only get past today . . . "

"Once you're fifty, it doesn't work anymore, is that the idea?"

She nodded, looking down past her crossed ankles to the water.

"I think so, don't you?"

Moving cautiously, I took the champagne and glasses from their chilled bag and managed to ease out the cork so that it hardly popped at all. I handed her a glass.

"A toast to your birthday."

She raised it to her lips, then paused.

"Once I drink it, I'll be fifty."

When she'd said it her lips stayed a little apart.

"Accept it. It's not so very bad."

She smiled, got up without spilling a drop, went to the very edge of the diving board, and stood there silhouetted against the last of the light over the blank water. A perfect target for Welbrand with a rifle in the bushes. I understood then why she'd brought us there.

"Sit down."

She only shook her head slowly and raised the glass to her lips. At some point between the time she stood up and then my hand had gone into the shoulder bag lying beside me and come out holding the revolver. As she raised the glass I eased off the safety catch. When her lips touched it I fired, just the one shot. She stayed frozen there for a moment, then she and the glass, each on its own separate trajectory, fell down and into the water. Ripples were still rocking the alarmed ducks as I left the pool and walked fast along the path through the bushes. I brought her gun with me. An oath is meant to be kept, and somewhere, still alive in the world, I'm sure, is Welbrand. ●

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Art by Steve Cavallo

KING BEE AND HONEY

by Steven Saylor

"Gordianus! And Eco! How was your journey?"

"I'll tell you as soon as I get off this horse and discover whether I still have two legs."

My friend Lucius Claudius let out a good-natured laugh. "Why, the ride from Rome is only a few hours! And a fine, paved road all the way. And glorious weather!"

That was true enough. It was a day in late Aprilis, one of those golden spring days that one might wish could last forever. Sol himself seemed to think so; the sun stood still in the sky, as if enraptured by the beauty of the earth below and unwilling to move on.

And the earth was indeed beautiful, especially this little corner of it, tucked amid the rolling Etruscan countryside north of Rome. The hills were studded with oaks and spangled with yellow and purple flowers. Here in the valley, groves of olive trees

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shimmered silver and green in the faint breeze. The orchards of fig trees and lime trees were in full leaf. Bees hummed and flitted among the long rows of grape leaves. There was bird song on the air, mingled with a tune being sung by a group of slaves striding through a nearby field and swinging their scythes in unison. I breathed deeply the sweet odor of tall grass drying in the sun. Even my good friend Lucius looked unusually robust, like a plump-cheeked Silenus with frazzled red hair; all he needed to complete the image was a pitcher of wine and a few attendant wood nymphs.

"All the bee lore in 'King Bee and Honey' is authentically Roman," says author Steven Saylor, "including the guardian presence of Priapus at the hives. And the Romans did use the Latin word for honey (mel) as an endearment, much as we do." Mr. Saylor's work is rewarding not only in providing suspenseful entertainment, but in bringing to light many aspects of the daily lives of the historical figures of whom he writes. ¶

I slipped off my horse and discovered I still had legs after all. Eco sprang from his mount and leaped into the air. Oh, to be a fourteen-year-old boy, and to never know a stiff muscle! A slave led our horses toward the stable.

Lucius gave me a hearty slap across the shoulders and walked me toward the villa. Eco ran in circles around us, like an excited pup. It was a charming house, low and rambling with many windows, their shutters all thrown open to let in the sunlight and fresh air. I thought of houses in the city, all narrow and crammed together and windowless for fear of robbers climbing in from the street. Here, even the house seemed to have sighed with relief and allowed itself to relax.

"You see, I told you," said Lucius. "It's a beautiful place, isn't it? And look at you, Gordianus. That smile on your face! The last time I saw you in the city, you looked like a man wearing shoes too small for his feet. I knew this was what you needed—an escape to the countryside for a few days. It always works for me. When all the politicking and litigation in the Forum becomes too much, I flee to my farm. You'll see. A few days

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and you'll be a reborn man. And Eco will have a splendid time, climbing the hills, swimming in the stream. But you didn't bring Bethesda?"

"No. She—" I began to say *she refused to come,* which was the exact truth, but I feared that my highborn friend would smirk at the idea of a slave refusing to accompany her master on a trip. "Bethesda is a creature of the city, you know. Hardly suited for the countryside. She'd have been useless to me here."

"Oh, I see." Lucius nodded. "She refused to come?"

"Well . . ." I began to shake my head, then gave it up and laughed out loud. Of what use were citified pretensions here, where Sol stood still and cast his golden light over a perfect world? Lucius was right. Best to leave such nonsense back in Rome. On an impulse I reached for Eco, and when he made a game of slipping from my grasp I gave chase. The two of us ran in circles around Lucius, who threw back his head and laughed.

That night we dined on asparagus and goose liver, followed by mushrooms sautéed in goose fat and a guinea hen in a honey-vinegar sauce sprinkled with pine nuts. The fare was simply but superbly prepared. I praised the meal so profusely that Lucius called in the cook to take a bow.

I was surprised to see that the cook was a woman, and still in her twenties. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, no doubt to keep it out of her way in the kitchen. Her plump cheeks were all the plumper for the beaming smile on her face; she appreciated praise. Her face was pleasant, if not beautiful, and her figure, even in her loose clothing, appeared to be quite voluptuous.

"Davia started as an assistant to my head cook at my house in Rome," Lucius explained. "She helped him shop, measured out ingredients, that sort of thing. But when he fell ill last winter and she had to take his place, she showed such a knack that I decided to give her the run of the kitchen here at the farm. So you approve, Gordianus?"

"Indeed. Everything was splendid, Davia."

Eco added his praise but his applause was interrupted by a profound yawn. Too much good food and fresh air, he explained, gesturing to the table and to the breath before his lips. Eco's tongue was useless, due to a fever that had nearly claimed his life, but he was a skillful mime. He excused himself and went straight to bed.

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Lucius and I took chairs down to the stream and sipped his finest vintage while we listened to the gurgling of the water and the chirring of the crickets and watched thin clouds pass like shredded veils across the face of the moon.

"Ten days of this, and I think I might forget the way back to Rome."

"Ah, but not the way back to Bethesda, I'll wager. I was hoping to see her. She's a city flower, yes, but put her in the country and she might put out some fresh blossoms that would surprise you. Ah well, it shall be just us three fellows, then."

"No other guests?"

"No, no, no! I specifically waited until I had no pending social obligations, so that we should have the place all to ourselves." He smiled at me under the moonlight, then turned down his lips in a mock-frown. "It's *not* what you're thinking, Gordianus."

"And what am I thinking?"

"That for all his homely virtues, your friend Lucius Claudius is still a patrician and subject to the snobbery of his class; that I chose a time to invite you here when there'd be no one else around so as to avoid having you seen by my more elevated friends. But that's not the point at all. I wanted you to have the place to yourself so that *you* wouldn't have to put up with *them!* Oh, if you only knew the sort of people I'm talking about."

I smiled at his discomfort. "My work does occasionally bring me into contact with the highborn and wealthy, you know."

"Ah, but it's a different matter, socializing with them. I won't even mention my own family, though they're the worst. Oh, there are the fortune-hunters, the ones on the fringes of society who think they can scrape and claw their way to respectability like a ferret. And the grandpas, the boring, self-important old farts who never let anyone forget that some ancestor of theirs served two terms as consul or sacked a Greek temple or slaughtered a shipload of Carthaginians back in the golden age. And the crackpots who claim they're descended from Hercules or Venus—more likely Medusa, judging from their table manners. And the too-rich, spoiled young men who can't think of anything but gambling and horse racing, and the too-pretty girls who can't think of anything but new gowns and jewels, and the parents who can't think of anything but matching up the boys and girls so that they can breed more of the same.

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"You see, Gordianus, you meet these people at their worst, when there's been a dreadful murder or some other crime, and they're all anxious and confused and need your help, but I see them at their best, when they're preening themselves like African birds and oozing charm all over each other like honey, and believe me, at their best they're a thousand times worse! Oh, you can't imagine some of the dreadful gatherings I've had to put up with here at the villa. No, no, nothing like that for the next ten days. This shall be a respite for you and me alike—for you from the city, and for me from my so-called circle of friends."

But it was not to be.

The next three days were like a foretaste of Elysium. Eco explored every corner of the farm, as fascinated by butterflies and ant beds as he was by the arcane mechanics of the olive-oil press and the wine press. He had always been a city boy—he was an abandoned child of the streets when I adopted him—but it was clear he could develop a taste for the country.

As for me, I treated myself to Davia's cooking at least three times a day, toured the farm with Lucius and his foreman, and spent restful hours lying in the shade of the willows along the stream, scrolling through trashy Greek novels from Lucius's small library. The plots all seemed to be the same—humble boy meets noble girl, girl is abducted by pirates/giants/soldiers, boy rescues girl and turns out to be of noble birth himself—but such nonsense seemed to fit my mood perfectly. I allowed myself to become pampered and relaxed and thoroughly lazy in body, mind, and spirit, and I enjoyed every moment.

Then came the fourth day, and the visitors.

They arrived just as the light was beginning to fail, in an open traveling coach drawn by four white horses and followed by a small retinue of slaves. She was dressed in green and wore her auburn curls pinned in the peculiar upright fan-shape that happened to be stylish in the city that spring; it made a suitable frame for the striking beauty of her face. He wore a dark-blue tunic that was sleeveless and cut above the knees to show off his athletic arms and legs, and an oddly trimmed little beard that seemed designed to flout convention. They looked to be about my age, midway between thirty and forty.

I happened to be walking back to the villa from the stream. Lucius stepped out of the house to greet me, looked past me, and saw the new arrivals.

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"Numa's balls!" he exclaimed under his breath, borrowing my own favorite epithet.

"Friends of yours?" I said.

"Yes!" He could not have sounded more dismayed if he was being paid a visit by Hannibal's ghost riding a ghostly elephant.

He, it turned out, was a fellow named Titus Didius. She was Antonia, his second wife. (They had both divorced their first spouses in order to marry each other, generating enormous scandal and no small amount of envy among their unhappily married peers.) According to Lucius, who took me aside while the couple settled into the room next to mine, they drank like fishes, fought like jackals, and stole like magpies. (I noticed that the slaves discreetly put away the costliest wines, the best silver, and the most fragile Arretine vases shortly after they arrived.)

"It seems they were planning to spend a few days up at my cousin Manius's place, but when they arrived, no one was there. Well, I know what happened—Manius went down to Rome just to avoid them. I wonder that they didn't pass him on the way!"

"Surely not."

"Surely yes. So now they've come here, asking to stay awhile. 'Just a day or two, before we head back to the city. We were so looking forward to some time in the country. You will be a dear, won't you, Lucius, and let us stay, just for a bit?' More likely ten days than two!"

I shrugged. "They don't look so awful to me."

"Oh, wait. Just wait."

"Well, if they're really as terrible as that, why don't you let them stay the night and then turn them away?"

"Turn them away?" He repeated the phrase as if I'd stopped speaking Latin. "Turn them *away?* You mean, send away Titus Didius, old Marcus Didius's boy? Refuse my hospitality to *Antonia?* But Gordianus, I've known these people since I was a child. I mean, to avoid them, like cousin Manius has done, well, that's one thing. But to say to them, to their faces—"

"Never mind. I understand," I said, though I didn't, really.

Whatever their faults, the couple had one overriding virtue: They were charming. So charming, indeed, that on that first night, dining in their company, I began to think that Lucius was wildly exaggerating. Certainly they showed none of the charac-

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teristic snobbishness of their class toward Eco and me. Titus wanted to hear all about my travels and my work for advocates like Marcus Cicero. ("Is it true," he asked, leaning toward me earnestly, "that he's a eunuch?") Eco was obviously fascinated by Antonia, who was even more remarkably beautiful by lamplight. She made a game of flirting with him, but she did so with a natural grace that was neither condescending nor mean. They were both witty, vibrant, and urbane, and their sense of humor was only slightly, charmingly, vulgar.

They also appreciated good cooking. Just as I had done after my first meal here, they insisted on complimenting the cook. When Davia appeared, Titus's face lit up with surprise, and not just at the fact that the cook was a young woman. When Lucius opened his mouth to introduce her, Titus snatched the name from his lips. "Davia!" he said. The word left a smile on his face.

A look of displeasure flashed in Antonia's eyes.

Lucius looked back and forth between Davia and Titus, speechless for a moment. "Then you . . . already know Davia?"

"Why, of course. We met once before, at your house in the city. Davia wasn't the cook, though. Only a helper in the kitchen."

"When was this?" asked Antonia, smiling sweetly.

Titus shrugged. "Last year? The year before? At one of Lucius's dinner parties, I suppose. An odd thing—you weren't there, as I recall. Something kept you home that night, my dear. A headache, perhaps . . ." He gave his wife a commiserating smile and then looked back at Davia with another kind of smile.

"And how is it that you happened to meet the cook's helper?" Antonia's voice took on a slight edge.

"Oh, I think I must have gone into the kitchen to ask a favor of the cook, or something like that. And then I . . . well, I met Davia. Didn't I, Davia?"

"Yes." Davia looked at the floor. Though it was hard to tell by the lamplight, it seemed to me that she was blushing.

"Well," said Titus, clapping his hands together, "you have become a splendid cook, Davia! Entirely worthy of your master's famously high standards. About that we're all agreed, yes? Gordianus, Eco, Lucius . . . Antonia?"

Everyone nodded in unison, some more enthusiastically than others. Davia muttered her thanks and disappeared back into the kitchen.

* * *

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Lucius's new guests were tired from traveling. Eco and I had enjoyed a long, full day. Everyone turned in early.

The night was warm. Windows and doors were left open to take advantage of the slight breeze. There was a great stillness on the earth, of a sort that one never experiences in the city. As I began to drift into the arms of Morpheus, in the utter quiet I thought I could hear the distant, dreamy rustling of the sheep in their pen, the hushed sighing of the high grass far away by the road, and even a hint of the stream's gentle gurgling. Eco, with whom I shared the room, began to snore very gently.

Then the fighting began.

At first I could hear only voices from the next room, not words. But after a while they started shouting. Her voice was higher and carried better than his.

"You filthy adulterer! Bad enough that you take advantage of the girls in our own household, but picking off another man's slaves—"

Titus shouted something, presumably in his defense.

She was not impressed. "Oh, you filthy liar! You can't fool me. I saw the way you looked at her tonight. And how dare you try to bring up that business about me and the pearl-diver at Andros? That was all in your own drunken imagination!"

Titus shouted again. Antonia shouted. This went on for quite some time. There was a sound of breaking pottery. Silence for a while, and then the shouting resumed.

I groaned and pulled the coverlet over my head. After a while I realized that the shouting had stopped. I rolled onto my side, thinking I might finally be able to sleep, and noticed that Eco was standing on his knees on his sleeping couch, his ear pressed against the wall that ran between our room and theirs.

"Eco, what in Hades are you doing?"

He kept his ear to the wall and waved at me to be quiet.

"They're not fighting again, are they?"

He turned and shook his head.

"What is it, then?"

The moonlight showed a crooked smile on his face. He pumped his eyebrows up and down like a leering street mime, made a circle with the fingers of one hand and a pointer with the opposite forefinger, and performed a gesture all the street mimes knew.

"Oh! I see. Well, stop listening like that. It's rude." I rolled to my other side and pulled the coverlet over my head.

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I must have slept for quite some time, for it was the moonlight, traveling from Eco's side of the room to mine, that struck my face and woke me. I sighed and rearranged the coverlet and saw that Eco was still up on his knees, his ear pressed fervently against the wall.

They must have been at it all night long.

For the next two days Lucius Claudius repeatedly drew me aside to fret over the intrusion on my holiday, but Eco went about his simple pleasures, I still found time to read alone down by the stream, and to the extent that Titus and Antonia intruded on us, they were in equal measure irritating and amusing. No one could be more delightful than Titus at dinner, at least until the cup of wine that was one cup too many, after which his jokes all became a little too vulgar and his jabs a little too sharp. And no one could be more sweetly alluring over a table of roasted pig than Antonia, until something happened to rub her the wrong way. She had a look which could send a hot spike through a man as surely as the beast on the table had been spitted and put on to roast.

I had never met a couple quite like them. I began to see how none of their friends could refuse them anything. I also began to see how they drove those same friends to distraction with their sudden fits of temper and their all-consuming passion for each other, which ran hot and cold, and could scald or chill any outsider who happened to come too close.

On the third day of their visit, Lucius announced that he had come up with something special that we could all do together.

"Have you ever seen honey collected from a hive, Eco? No, I thought not. And you, Gordianus? No? What about you two?"

"Why, no, actually," said Antonia. She and her husband had slept until noon and were just joining the rest of us down by the stream for our midday meal.

"Does that water have to gurgle so loud?" Titus rubbed his temples. "Did you say something about bees, Lucius? I seem to have a swarm of them buzzing in my head this morning."

"It is no longer morning, Titus, and the bees are not in your head but in a glen downstream a bit," said Lucius in a chiding tone.

Antonia wrinkled her brow. "How *does* one collect the honey? I suppose I've never given it much thought—I just enjoy eating it!"

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"Oh, it's quite a science," said Lucius. "I have a slave named Ursus whom I bought specifically for his knowledge of beekeeping. He builds the hives out of hollowed strips of bark tied up with vines and covered with mud and leaves. He keeps away pests, makes sure the meadow has the right kind of flowers, and collects the honey twice a year. Now that the Pleiades have risen in the night sky, he says it's time for the spring harvest."

"Where does honey come from? I mean, where do the bees get it?" said Antonia. Puzzlement gave her face a deceptively vulnerable charm.

"Who cares?" said Titus, taking her hand and kissing her palm. "You are my honey!"

"Oh, and you are my king bee!" They kissed. Eco made a show of wrinkling his nose and shuddering. Faced with actual kissing, his adolescent prurience turned to squeamishness.

"Where *does* honey come from?" I said. "And do bees really have kings?"

"Well, I shall tell you," said Lucius. "Honey falls from the sky, of course, like dew. So Ursus says, and he should know. The bees gather it up and concentrate it until it becomes all gooey and thick. To have a place to put it, they gather tree sap and the wax from certain plants to build their combs inside the hive. And do they have kings? Oh yes! They will gladly give their lives to protect him. Sometimes two different swarms go to war. The kings hang back, plotting the strategy, and the clash can be terrific—acts of heroism and sacrifice to rival the *Iliad!*"

"And when they're not at war?" said Antonia.

"A hive is like a bustling city. Some go out to work in the fields, collecting the honey-dew, some work indoors, constructing and maintaining the combs, and the kings lay down laws for the common good. They say Jupiter granted the bees the wisdom to govern themselves as repayment for the favor they did him in his infancy. When Jupiter was hidden in a cave to save him from his father Saturn, the bees sustained him with honey."

"You make them sound almost superior to humans," said Titus, laughing and tracing kisses on Antonia's wrist.

"Oh, hardly. They're still ruled by kings, after all, and haven't yet advanced to having a republic, like ourselves," explained Lucius earnestly, not realizing that he was being teased. "So, who wants to go and see the honey collected?"

"I shouldn't want to get stung," said Antonia cautiously.

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"Oh, there's little danger of that. Ursus sedates the bees with smoke. It makes them dull and drowsy. And we'll stand well out of the way."

Eco nodded enthusiastically.

"I suppose it would be interesting. . . ." said Antonia.

"Not for me," said Titus, lying back on the grassy bank and rubbing his temples.

"Oh, Titus, don't be a dull, drowsy king bee," said Antonia, poking at him and pouting. "Come along."

"No."

"Titus. . . ." There was a hint of menace in Antonia's voice.

Lucius flinched in anticipation of a row. He cleared his throat. "Yes, Titus, come along. The walk will do you good. Get your blood pumping."

"No. My mind's made up."

Antonia flashed a brittle smile. "Very well, then have it your way. You shall miss the fun, and so much the worse for you. Shall we get started, Lucius?"

"The natural enemies of the bee are the lizard, the woodpecker, the spider, and the moth," droned the slave Ursus, walking beside Eco at the head of our little procession. "These creatures are all jealous of the honey, you see, and will do great damage to the hives to get at it." Ursus was a big, stout man of middle years and lumbering gait, hairy all over, to judge from the thatches that showed at the openings of his long-sleeved tunic. Several other slaves followed behind us on the path that ran along the stream, carrying the embers and hay-torches that would be used to make the smoke.

"There are plants which are enemies of the bees as well," Ursus went on. "The yew tree, for example. You never put a hive close to a yew tree, because the bees will sicken and the honey will turn bitter and runny. But they thrive close to olive trees and willows. For gathering their honey-dew they like red and purple flowers; blood-red hyacinth is their favorite. If there's thyme close by, they'll use it to give the honey a delicate flavor. They prefer to live close to a stream with shaded, mossy pools where they can drink and wash themselves. And they like calm and quiet. As you will see, Eco, the secluded place where we keep the hives has all these qualities, being close by the stream, surrounded by olives and willows, and planted with all the flowers that most delight the bees."

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I heard the bees before I saw them. Their humming joined the gurgling of the stream and grew louder as we passed through a hedge of cassia shrubs and entered a sun-dappled, flower-spangled little glen that was just as Ursus had described. There was magic to the place. Satyrs and nymphs seemed to frolic in the shadows, just out of sight. One could almost imagine the infant Jupiter lying in the soft grass, living off the honey of the bees.

The hives, ten in all, stood in a row on waist-high wooden platforms in the center of the clearing. They were shaped like tall domes, and with their coverings of dried mud and leaves looked as if they had been put there by nature; Ursus was a master of craft as well as lore. Each hive had only a tiny break in the bark for an entrance, and through these openings the bees were busily coming and going.

A figure beneath a nearby willow caught my eyes, and for a startled instant I thought a satyr had stepped into the clearing to join us. Antonia saw it at the same instant. She let out a little gasp of surprise, then clapped her hands in delight.

"And what is this fellow doing here?" She laughed and stepped closer for a better look.

"He watches over the glen," said Ursus. "The traditional guardian of the hives. Scares away honey-thieves and birds."

It was a bronze statue of the god Priapus, grinning lustfully, with one hand on his hip and a sickle held upright in the other. He was naked and eminently, rampantly priapic. Antonia, fascinated, gave him a good looking-over and touched him for luck.

My attention at that moment was drawn to Eco, who had wandered off to the other side of the glen and was stooping amid some purple flowers that grew low to the ground. I hurried to join him.

"Be careful of those, Eco. Don't pick any more. Go wash your hands in the stream."

"What's the matter?" said Ursus.

"This is Etruscan star-tongue, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes."

"If you're as careful about what grows here as you say, I'm surprised to see it. The plant is poisonous, isn't it?"

"To people, perhaps," said Ursus dismissively. "But not to bees. Sometimes when a hive takes sick it's the only thing to cure them. You take the roots of the star-tongue, boil them with wine, let the tonic cool, and set it out for the bees to drink. It gives them new life."

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"But it might do the opposite for a man."

"Yes, but everyone on the farm knows to stay away from the stuff, and the animals are too smart to eat it. I doubt that the flowers are poisonous; it's the roots that hold the bee-tonic."

"Well, even so, go wash your hands in the stream," I said to Eco, who had followed this exchange and was looking at me expectantly. The beekeeper shrugged and went about the business of the honey harvest.

As Lucius had promised, it was fascinating to watch. While the other slaves alternately kindled and smothered the torches, producing clouds of smoke, Ursus strode fearlessly into the thick of the sedated bees. His cheeks bulged with water, which he occasionally sprayed from his lips in a fine mist if the bees began to rouse themselves. One by one he lifted up the hives and used a long knife to scoop out a portion of the honeycomb. The wafting clouds of smoke, Ursus's slow, deliberate progress from hive to hive, the secluded magic of the place, and, not least, the smiling presence of the watchful god, gave the harvest the aura of a rustic religious procession. So men have collected the sweet labor of the bees since the beginning of time.

Only one thing occurred to jar the spell. As Ursus was lifting the very last of the hives, a flood of ghostly white moths poured out from underneath. They flitted through the smoky reek and dispersed amid the shimmering olive leaves above. From this hive Ursus would take no honey, saying that the presence of the bandit moths was an ill omen.

The party departed from the glen in a festive mood. Ursus cut pieces of honeycomb and handed them out. Everyone's fingers and lips were soon sticky with honey. Even Antonia made a mess of herself.

When we reached the villa she ran ahead. "King bee," she cried, "I have a sweet kiss for you! And a sweet reason for you to kiss my fingertips! Your honey is covered with honey!"

What did she see when she ran into the foyer of the house? Surely it was no more than the rest of us saw, who entered only a few heartbeats after her. Titus was fully dressed, and so was Davia. Perhaps there was a fleeting look on their faces which the rest of us missed, or perhaps Antonia sensed rather than saw the thing that set off her fury.

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Whatever it was, the row began then and there. Antonia stalked out of the foyer, toward her room. Titus quickly followed. Davia, blushing, hurried off toward the kitchen.

Lucius looked at me and rolled his eyes. "What now?" A strand of honey, thin as spider's silk, dangled from his plump chin.

The row showed no signs of abating at dinner. While Lucius and I made conversation about the honey harvest and Eco joined in with eloquent flourishes of his hands (his evocation of the flight of the moths was particularly vivid), Antonia and Titus ate in stony silence. They retired to their bedchamber early. That night there were no sounds of reconciliation. Titus growled and whined like a dog. Antonia shrieked and wept.

Eco slept despite the noise, but I tossed and turned until at last I decided to take a walk. The moon lit my way as I stepped out of the villa, made a circuit of the stable, and strolled by the slaves' quarters. Coming around a corner, I saw two figures seated close together on a bench beside the portico that led to the kitchen. Though her hair was not in a bun but let down for the night, the moon lit up her face well enough for me to recognize Davia. By his bearish shape I knew the man who sat with one arm around her, stroking her face: Ursus. They were so intent on each other that they did not notice me. I turned and went back the way I had come, reflecting that the hand of Venus reaches everywhere, and wondering if Lucius was aware that his cook and his beekeeper were lovers.

What a contrast their silent devotions made to the couple in the room next to me. When I returned to bed, I had to cover my head with a pillow to muffle the sounds of them still arguing.

But the morning seemed to bring a new day. While Lucius, Eco, and I ate a breakfast of bread and honey in the little garden outside Lucius's study, Antonia came walking up from the direction of the stream, bearing a basket of flowers.

"Antonia!" said Lucius. "I should have thought you were still abed."

"Not at all," she said, beaming. "I was up before dawn, and on a whim I went down to the stream to pick some flowers. Aren't they lovely? I shall have one of my girls weave them into a garland for me to wear at dinner tonight."

"Your beauty needs no ornament," said Lucius. Indeed, Antonia looked especially radiant that morning. "And where is—mmm, dare I call him your king bee?"

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Antonia laughed. "Still abed, I imagine. But I shall go and rouse him at once. This day is too beautiful to be missed! I was thinking that Titus and I might take along a basket of food and some wine and spend most of the day down by the stream. Just the *two* of us. . . ."

She raised her eyebrows. Lucius understood. "Ah yes, well, Gordianus and I have plenty to occupy us here at the villa. And Eco—I believe you were planning to do some exploring up on the hill today, weren't you?"

Eco, not quite understanding, nodded nonetheless.

"Well then, it looks as though you and the king bee will have the stream all to yourselves," said Lucius.

Antonia beamed. "Lucius, you are so very sweet." She paused to kiss his blushing pate.

A little later, as we were finishing our leisurely breakfast, we saw the couple walking down toward the stream without even a slave to bear their baskets and blanket. They held hands and laughed and doted on each other so lavishly that Eco became positively queasy watching them.

By some acoustical curiosity, a sharp noise from the stream could sometimes carry all the way up to the house. So it was, some time later, standing by Lucius in front of the villa while he discussed the day's work with his foreman, that I thought I heard a cry and a hollow crack from that direction. Lucius and the foreman, one talking while the other listened, seemed not to notice, but Eco, poking about an old wine press nearby, pricked up his ears. Eco may be mute, but his hearing is sharp. We had both heard Titus's raised voice too often over the last few days not to recognize it.

The spouses had not made up, after all, I thought. The two of them were at it again. . . .

Then, a little later, Antonia screamed. We all heard it. It was not her familiar shriek of rage. It was a scream of pure panic.

She screamed again.

We ran all the way, Eco in the lead, Lucius huffing and puffing in the rear. "By Hercules," he shouted, "he must be killing her!"

But Antonia wasn't dying. Titus was.

He was flat on his back on the blanket, his short tunic twisted all askew and hitched up about his hips. He stared at the leafy canopy above, his pupils hugely dilated. "Dizzy . . . spinning . . ." he gasped. He coughed and wheezed and grabbed his throat,

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then bent forward. His hands went to his belly, clutching at cramps. His face was a deathly shade of blue.

"What in Hades!" exclaimed Lucius. "What happened to him, Antonia? Gordianus, what can we do?"

"Can't breathe!" Titus said, mouthing words with no air behind them. "The end . . . the end of me . . . oh, it hurts!" He grabbed at his loincloth. "Damn the gods!"

He pulled at his tunic, as if it constricted his chest. The foreman gave me his knife. I cut the tunic open and tore it off, leaving him naked except for the loose loincloth about his hips; it did no good, except to show us that his whole body was turning blue. I turned him on his side and reached into his mouth, thinking he might be choking, but that did no good either.

He kept struggling until the end, fighting to breathe. It was a horrible death to watch. At last the wheezing and clenching stopped. His limbs unfurled. The life went out of his staring eyes.

Antonia stood by, stunned and silent, her face like a petrified tragedy mask. "Oh no!" she whispered, dropping to her knees and embracing the body. She began to scream again and to sob wildly. Her agony was almost as hard to watch as Titus's death throes, and there seemed as little to be done about it.

"But how in Hades did this happen?" said Lucius. "What caused it?"

Eco and the foreman and I looked at each other dumbly.

"Her fault!" wailed Antonia.

"What?" said Lucius.

"Your cook! That horrible woman! It's her fault!"

Lucius looked around at the scattered remains of food. Crusts of bread, a little jar of honey, black olives, a wineskin, a broken clay bottle—that had been the hollow crack I had heard. "What do you mean? Are you saying she poisoned him?"

Antonia's sobs caught in her throat. "Yes, that's it. Yes! It was one of my own slaves who put the food in the basket, but she's the one who prepared the food. Davia! The witch poisoned him. She poisoned everything!"

"Oh, dear, but that means—" Lucius knelt. He gripped Antonia's arms and looked into her eyes. "You might be poisoned as well! Antonia, do you feel any pain? Gordianus, what should we do for her?"

I looked at him blankly. I had no idea.

* * *

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Antonia showed no symptoms. She was not poisoned, after all. But something had killed her husband, and in a most sudden and terrible fashion.

Her slaves soon came running. We left her grieving over the body and went back to the villa to confront Davia. Lucius led the way into the kitchen.

"Davia! Do you know what's happened?"

She looked at the floor and swallowed hard. "They say . . . that one of your guests has died, master."

"Yes. What do you know about it?"

She looked shocked. "I? Nothing, master."

"Nothing? They were eating food prepared by you when Titus took ill. Do you still say you know nothing about it?"

"Master, I don't know what you mean. . . ."

"Davia," I said, "you must tell us what was going on between you and Titus Didius."

She stammered and looked away.

"Davia! A man is dead. His wife accuses you. You're in great danger. If you're innocent, the truth could save you. Be brave! Now tell us what passed between you and Titus Didius."

"Nothing! I swear it, by my mother's shade. Not that he didn't try, and keep trying. He approached me at the master's house in the city that night he first saw me. He tried to get me to go into an empty room with him. I wouldn't do it. He kept trying the same thing here. Following me, trapping me. Touching me. I never encouraged him! Yesterday, while you were all down at the hives, he came after me, pulling at my clothes, kissing me. I just kept moving away. He seemed to like that, chasing me. When everyone finally came back, I almost wept with relief."

"He harassed you, then," said Lucius sadly. "My fault, I suppose; I should have warned him to keep his hands off my property. But was it really so terrible that you had to poison him?"

"No! I never—"

"You'll have to torture her if you want the truth!" Antonia stood in the doorway. Her fists were clenched, her hair dishevelled. She looked utterly distraught, like a vengeful harpy. "Torture her, Lucius! That's what they do when a slave testifies in a court. It's your right—you're her master. It's your duty—you were Titus's host. I demand that you torture her until she confesses, and then put her to death!"

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Davia turned as white as the moths that had flown from the hive. She fainted to the floor.

Antonia, mad with grief, retired to her room. Davia regained consciousness, but seemed to be in the grip of some brain fever; she trembled wildly and would not speak.

"Gordianus, what am I to do?" Lucius paced back and forth in the foyer. "I suppose I'll have to torture the girl if she won't confess. But I don't even know how to go about such a thing! None of my slaves would make a suitable torturer. I suppose I could consult one of my neighbors—"

"Talk of torture is premature," I said, wondering if Lucius could actually go through with such a thing. He was a gentle man in a cruel world; sometimes the world's expectations won out over his basic nature. He might surprise me. I didn't want to find out. "I think we should have another look at the body, now that we've calmed down a bit."

We returned to the stream. Titus lay as we had left him, except that someone had closed his eyes and pulled down his tunic.

"You know a lot about poisons, Gordianus," said Lucius. "What do you think?"

"There are many poisons and many reactions. I can't begin to guess what killed Titus. If we should find some store of poison in the kitchen, or if one of the other slaves observed Davia doing something to the food . . ."

Eco gestured to the scattered food, mimed the act of feeding a farm animal, and vividly performed the animal's death—a hard thing to watch, having just witnessed an actual death.

"Yes, we could verify the presence of poison in the food that way, at the waste of some poor beast. But if it was in the food we see here, why wasn't Antonia poisoned as well? Eco, bring me those pieces of the clay bottle. Do you remember hearing the sound of something breaking at about the time we heard Titus cry out?"

Eco nodded and handed me the pieces of fired clay.

"What do you suppose was in this?" I said.

"Wine, I imagine. Or water," said Lucius.

"But there's a wineskin over there. And the inside of this bottle appears to be as dry as the outside. I have a hunch, Lucius. Would you summon Ursus?"

"Ursus? But why?"

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"I have a question for him."

The beekeeper soon came lumbering down the hill. For such a big, bearish fellow, he was very squeamish in the presence of death. He stayed well away from the body and made a face every time he looked at it.

"I'm a city dweller, Ursus. I don't know very much about bees. I've never been stung by one. But I've heard that a bee sting can kill a man. Is that true, Ursus?"

He looked embarrassed at the idea that his beloved bees could do such a thing. "Well, yes, it can happen. But it's rare. Most people get stung and it just goes away. But some people . . ."

"Have you ever seen anyone die of a bee sting, Ursus?"

"No."

"But with all your lore, you must know something about it. How does it happen? How do they die?"

"It's their lungs that give out. They strangle to death. Can't breathe, turn blue . . ."

Lucius looked aghast. "Do you think that's it, Gordianus? That he was stung by one of my bees?"

"Let's have a look. The sting would leave a mark, wouldn't it, Ursus?"

"Oh yes, a red swelling. And more than that, you'd find the poisoned barb itself. It stays behind in the flesh when the bee flies off. Just a tiny thing, but it would be there."

We pulled off Titus's tunic, examining his chest and limbs, rolled him over, and examined his back. We combed through his hair and looked at his scalp.

"Nothing," said Lucius.

"Nothing," I admitted.

"What are the chances, anyway, that a bee happened to fly by—"

"The bottle, Eco. When did we hear it break? Before Titus cried out, or after?"

After, gestured Eco, rolling his fingers forward. He clapped. *Immediately* after.

"Yes, that's how I remember it, too. A bee, a cry, a broken bottle . . ." I pictured Antonia and Titus as I had last seen them together, hand in hand, doting on one another as they headed for the stream. "Two people in love, alone on a grassy bank—what might they reasonably be expected to get up to?"

"What do you mean, Gordianus?"

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"I think we shall have to examine Titus more intimately."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we shall have to take off his loincloth. It's already loosened, you see. Probably by Antonia."

As I thought we might, we found the red, swollen bee sting in the most intimate of places.

"Of course, to be absolutely certain, we should find the stinger and remove it. I'll leave that task to you, Lucius. He was your friend, after all, not mine."

Lucius located and dutifully extracted the tiny barb. "Funny," he said. "I thought it would be bigger."

"What, the stinger?"

"No, his . . . well, the way he always bragged, I thought it must be . . . oh, never mind."

Confronted with the truth, Antonia confessed. She had never meant to kill Titus, only to punish him for his pursuit of Davia.

Her early morning trip to the stream had actually been an expedition to capture a bee. The stoppered clay bottle containing her prize had been hidden under the flowers in her basket. Later, Titus himself unwittingly carried the bee in the bottle down to the stream in the basket of food.

It was the Priapus in the glen that had given her the inspiration. "I've always thought the god looks so . . . *vulnerable* . . . like that," she told us. If she could inflict a wound on Titus in that most vulnerable of places, the punishment would be not only painful and humiliating but strikingly appropriate.

As they lazed on their blanket beside the stream, cuddling with their clothing on, Titus became aroused, just as she planned. Antonia reached for the bottle and unstoppered it. Titus was lying back with his eyes closed and a dreamy smile on his lips. The wound was inflicted before he realized what was happening. He cried out and knocked the bottle from her hand. It broke against the trunk of a willow tree.

She was ready to flee, knowing he might explode with anger. But the catastrophe that followed took her completely by surprise. Her shock and grief at Titus's death were entirely genuine.

Antonia could hardly admit what she had done. Impulsively, she chose Davia as a scapegoat. She partly blamed Davia anyway, for tempting her husband.

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It was agreed that Lucius would not spread the whole truth of what had happened. Their circle of friends would be told that Titus had died of a bee sting, but not of Antonia's part. His death had been unintentional, after all, not deliberate murder. Antonia's grief was perhaps punishment enough. But her scapegoating of Davia was unforgivable. Would she have seen the lie through all the way to Davia's torture and death? Lucius thought so. He allowed her to stay the night, then sent her packing back to Rome, along with her husband's body, and told her never to visit or speak to him again.

Ironically, Titus might have been saved had he been a little more forthcoming or a little less amorous. Lucius later learned, in all the talk that followed on Titus's death, that Titus had once been stung by a bee as a boy and had fallen very ill. He had never talked of this to any of his friends, or even to his wife; only his old nurse and his closest relatives knew about it. When he hung back from seeing the honey harvest, I think he did so partly because he wanted time alone to pursue Davia, but I suspect he was also quite reasonably afraid to approach the hives, and unwilling to admit his fear. If he had told us then of his susceptibility to bee stings, I am certain that Antonia would never have attempted her vengeful scheme.

Eco and I saw out the rest of our visit, but the days that followed Antonia's departure were melancholy. Lucius was moody. The slaves, always superstitious about any death, were restless. Davia was still shaken, and her cooking suffered. The sun was as bright as when we arrived, the flowers as fragrant, the stream as sparkling, but the tragedy cast a pall over everything. When the day came for our departure, I was ready for the forgetful hustle and bustle of the city. And what a story I would have to tell Bethesda!

Before we left, I paid a visit to Ursus and took a last look at the hives down in the glen.

"Have you ever been stung by a bee yourself, Ursus?"

"Oh yes, many times."

"It must hurt."

"It smarts."

"But not too terribly, I suppose. Otherwise you'd stop being a beekeeper."

Ursus grinned. "Yes, bees can sting. But so can love. I always say that beekeeping is like loving a woman. You get stung every so often, but you keep coming back for more, because the honey is always worth it."

"Oh, not always, Ursus," I sighed. "Not always." ●

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OUTFOXXED

by David Delman

When the phone rings at two in the morning the caller figures to be a caller you wish was calling someone else. The caller was my cousin LaMar. The above applies.

"You awake, Roy?"

"I'm always awake at two A.M. It's my favorite time."

"Sheriff Foxx has disappeared."

That caused me to blink rapidly a few times and clear my throat once or twice before saying, "What exactly do you mean, disappeared?"

"I mean no one's seen him for two whole days. Not his wife, not his deputy, not his dentist—"

"His what?"

"Which is where he was supposed to be going, only he never got there. Where have *you* been, Roy?"

"Campaigning, of course. Where *would* I be with the election the day after tomorrow."

"The thing is, that deputy of his, Sam Bethune, you know who I mean?"

"Tub of lard. Mean eyes. One of those who isn't his nephew."

"That's Bethune. He's spent most of the day in Minnie O's saying you had something to do with how the sheriff's gone missing."

"Something like what?"

"He's not being real specific about that part, Roy—where the hell have you been? I've been calling for two days."

David Delman's interests as an author are not limited to crime fiction. He has written novels about subjects as diverse as British tennis and the American Civil War, and even his mystery stories for *EQMM* could almost be classified as mainstream. Mr. Delman's most recently published crime novel is *The Last Gambit* (St. Martin's Press, 1991).

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"Are you deaf, LaMar? I just told you—on the stump. Got in around midnight."

"Don't you listen to your messages?"

"Well, that time of night I hoped they'd keep."

"Roy, tell me true. Did you and Felix Foxx cross paths somewhere near Galway?"

"That's the part Bethune's being specific about, I take it."

"Yeah."

"When was it supposed to have happened?"

"Day before yesterday. He says about eleven P.M., just where Route 40 runs into Bedford Pike, you and Felix had a near head-on, only Felix swerved at the last minute and dinged your right rear instead. After which you both emerged from your vehicles, had words, came to blows, and you got decked in front of two witnesses."

"Pretty funny story."

"Funny? I don't think it's funny. I think it's on its way to scary."

"Is Bethune being specific about who those witnesses are?"

"Uh-uh. He says they're a couple of country boys who got in a brawl of their own, and Felix was taking them in to cool them off. They were locked in the back of his wagon so that you couldn't see them. Which is why Bethune won't reveal their identities. He's got to protect them from you, he says."

"Funnier and funnier."

"Is it? How come I'm not doubled over?"

"And the rest of what he's being non-specific about pertains to what I'm supposed to have done to Felix, causing him to disappear?"

"Roy . . ."

"Still here."

"Bethune spent three full hours in Minnie's last night haranguing whoever came by. And you know what—*nobody* was laughing."

I sighed, thinking about Felix Foxx, thinking about the town I live in, thinking about how dumb it was to underestimate the sheriff's grip on his constituency, and said, "Well, maybe funny wasn't the right word."

"Put some coffee on. I'm coming over."

He hung up. I got into jeans and a wool sweater—gets coolish at night here in Blue Ridge country come mid-September—and

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went into the kitchen to do as LaMar had told me. Too often, I do what LaMar Hunnicut tells me, a habit I got into because he's six months the older. LaMar says that so-called habit is a nonexistent habit, claimed by me whenever it's convenient to wriggle out from under.

Anyway, his ma and mine were sisters. He's not only kin, he bills himself as my best friend, and I guess he is if you'll allow the term a certain elasticity. He's also editor and publisher of the *Black Rock Gazette,* the weekly cash cow that's kept Hunnicuts comfortable upwards of seventy-five years. LaMar and I have been around for thirty-four of them, him those six months longer.

Despite what he says, LaMar's got this rapid-fire mouth, which he's used more times than I like to remember to talk me into follies of one sort or another. Back when we were freshmen at the university, for instance, he made me believe Dean Howard's wife would. . . . And she didn't. And I almost didn't get to be a sophomore.

LaMar says that then as always I believed what I wanted to believe.

When the coffee was ready I poured a cup and took it over to the window. Staring out, I found myself thinking of Fay Carteret Loomis, a subject tangential to follies. Our marriage was taking on the aspect of one, I decided glumly. Damn the woman. Maybe she *was* Black Rock's quintessential beauty over the last half century—LaMar's claim for her—but she had absolutely no tolerance for human frailty.

All the Carterets are strait-laced, and Fay Carteret Loomis, flesh of their flesh, wouldn't cut an inch of slack for a blind man balancing on an airplane wing. I mean, one extra beer at an old friend's bachelor party, and it's like the second coming of Benedict Arnold.

All right, maybe two extra beers, maybe even three. And what if I did miss the Carteret family barbecue that night due to a perfectly understandable lapse of memory.

"Lapse nothing. You were drunk as a skunk, and I wouldn't even mind that so much except you just used it as an excuse. The fact is, you don't like my family."

"I do like your family, in bits and pieces, but when they come at you in battalion strength . . ."

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"Oh, how you can twist things, Roy Loomis. Everybody thinks it's LaMar who's the song-and-dancer, but it's really you. You, Roy Loomis, have an honest face and a deceitful nature."

And with that she packed two bags and flounced off. River's Edge is where she came to earth, of course—the Carteret compound where all hurt Carterets go to lick their wounds.

That was five weeks ago.

Till then we'd never been apart more than a few days in four years of marriage. According to LaMar, we're a *pair* of stubborn jackasses, but the fact is I didn't desert *her* in the middle of a political campaign.

True, when she left, none of us (except LaMar maybe) knew there was going to be a campaign, but how much does that change things? She knows now, doesn't she?

It was a quiet night at Minnie O's, Desertion Day plus eight, and there I was sitting on a barstool sharing insights with Barney Cox when my banty cousin came roostering in. He thumbed Barney to some other corner.

"You stay where you are, Barney," I said, alerted to danger by LaMar's body language. "Nobody died and left him king."

But since Barney is on the *Gazette* payroll—a combination obit writer, classified-ad taker, and demon photographer—LaMar's word weighed the heavier. He was gone. I was talking to the wall.

"Roy," LaMar said, settling in. "Boozing isn't going to get Fay back."

"I don't want Fay back."

"And I don't want a Pulitzer Prize."

"Anyway, you're being ridiculous. A beer or two while discussing, among other things, the dark side of marriage as an institution, is *not* boozing. You sound like a Carteret, for God's sake. LaMar, when are *you* going to marry?"

He sensed the ill feeling behind the question and chose not to reply.

Minnie put a cold one before him, leaning forward as she did in behalf of her famous cleavage. For a moment the male segment of her patronage held its collective breath.

Minnie's both a good-looking widow and a Black Rock success story. In her forties now—red hair, lively blue eyes—she still has the figure that electrified the eighth grade of her time.

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When Mike O'Hara got mistaken for a three-point buck a few seasons back, Minnie took over the Shamrock Bar & Grill (now Minnie O's) one step ahead of the bankruptcy court. To the surprise of all, it turned out she was this natural businesswoman. Did some redecorating. Hired two new short-order cooks. Pretty soon much of Black Rock had developed the Minnie O' habit, dropping in for a bit of finger food, some conviviality, and rations of gossip. Married ladies, too, though a segment of that segment was impelled by the need to reconnoiter.

They knew, the county knew, Minnie was sleeping with someone's husband. Discreet as she was, however, there was no way to find out who if you weren't willing to be active.

Actually, only a few of us ever found out anyway.

But I'm getting slightly ahead of my story.

"I was rooting through the *Gazette* files this morning," LaMar said, remembering he had an axe to grind, "searching out background for my Sunday material. I'd got to thinking about corruption and how easy it is to get comfortable with it. In the end, as someone bright once said to me, societies fall apart because of the cheats they tolerate. You probably forgot who that someone is."

I kept silent.

"So I'm going through the files, and lo, I come across the story I did on a certain FBI guy who, through sheer cussedness, broke up an embezzlement scam involving very big fish in six states." He paused. "Roy, you were one hell of an FBI guy."

"What do you want me to say, LaMar?"

"I sure miss that cussedness."

And he looked at me admiringly. I have to admit that LaMar has a way of doing that to which I am partial. Maybe it's because he doesn't do it all that often. Once every two or three years is about his quota. So I found myself momentarily nostalgic—just as if shark-eat-shark politics hadn't made a career switch entirely sensible for that certain FBI guy.

"I was pretty damn cussed, wasn't I?"

"As cussed a law enforcer as you've been white bread as a lawyer."

Trust LaMar to give it to you between the eyes. And yet it was no more than I'd said to myself on lonely truth-telling nights. In the years since I'd returned to Black Rock, my private practice had grown increasingly private.

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"It's because your heart isn't in it, and people sense that," LaMar said. He paused. "I told that to Fay last night."

"LaMar," I said, irritated. "Does it ever occur to you that Fay is another man's wife?"

"She was this man's girlfriend once."

"That was back in high school, for God's sake."

He put the beer mug down, then turned to face me squarely. "I've told you before and I'll keep telling you until you take me seriously. There's only one woman in the world for me, and that's Fay Carteret Loomis. If I could steal her from you I would. In a New York minute. No matter what the consequences. But I can't, you fool. She has this weakness for you, which is the only thing about her I find less than admirable."

I let my breath out in a heavy sigh. "Okay, what else did you tell her?"

"When?"

"Last night, when you were doing your best to poison the air."

His expression remained unchanged. It was his noblesse oblige look, almost as familiar to me as his snake-oil salesman's.

"I told her you weren't the man to survive working at what bored him. I said it's why you'd been boozing. And I also suggested that maybe, just maybe, she'd been paying too much attention to Carterets at the expense of a Loomis."

"You really did?"

He nodded. And I believed him. And right there, I guess, is the reason why hopping mad as I sometimes get at him, I'll always, at bottom, love him.

"LaMar . . ."

"What?"

"Thanks."

"Would you care to hear what *she* said?"

"Yes."

"She told me to keep my pointy nose out of her business."

In some manner—I bet LaMar could tell you exactly—we moved from there to a discussion of just how shamelessly bent Felix Foxx was. And how Black Rock County deserved better. And how all my friends were damn sick and tired of me sitting on my tailbone. And this and that, until willy-nilly I was off my tailbone and onto the minority-party ticket.

The irony here is that Felix Foxx and I have always got on. We have a history. He and my daddy became friends as second-

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graders, hunting buddies later. Felix visited our house a lot when I was growing up—even after Daddy was named to the State Supreme Court as its youngest associate justice.

But they were yin and yang really, and a split was inevitable. I was there when it happened. Actually, as things turned out, I was a pivotal figure.

"Felix," I remember Daddy saying that evening, "there's suddenly much talk about you at the State House, talk of a disturbing nature, and it's come to me I probably owe you a warning."

His voice was quiet, so quiet it failed to fully detatch me from an adolescent torpor.

But Felix was alerted, I know now. "What warning is that, Judge?" he asked, decibel levels matching my daddy's.

It was midsummer and hot, and we'd been sitting out on the back porch for the past ten minutes or so, soaking up ice tea and the glories of a North Carolina sunset. Relaxed in body and mind, we'd been. But now Daddy had a set to his mouth.

He went on. "Out of friendship, understood?"

"Sure enough."

"All right, then, quick and straight: If they catch your hand in the till, and it's me you go up before, friendship won't signify. So apply your fabled cunning, Br'er Foxx, to stay out of my courtroom."

Felix nodded that big shaggy head of his, shrugged those barn-door shoulders, and told Daddy not to fret.

"Judge," he said, "trust me to do whatever needs doing." Having put that into words, he paused. I remember that pause for two reasons. One, it went on for a while, as if he had just, by accident, bumped into a bedrock principle. And two, because of the wicked way he grinned.

"I just realized why good folk like you get skunked all the time by no-account folk like me."

"Indeed? Why is that?"

"Because I *always* do what needs doing. No matter what, no matter to who."

Daddy smiled. "A warning of your own, Br'er Foxx?"

"Out of friendship, Judge."

"Well, I take your point. It's true though, isn't it, that the phrase 'fire with fire' was invented by good folk?"

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"Mmmm. Happen so, Judge. By good folk who maybe got their fingers burnt right after."

Even to me it seemed noticeably cooler on that porch.

It was then Felix said, "Roy, how far would you guess it was to the main fencepost, the one with the mailbox on it? About thirty yards?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Twenty dollars says I can beat you there."

At the time I was about seventeen, tall, thin, and vain of my flying feet—a dash man on the Black Rock High track team. And twenty dollars was an uncanny guess. I mean, how had Felix known the exact figure that would double my treasury?

The man crammed into the white wicker rocker opposite me weighed in the neighborhood of 280 pounds. Though he was six-three, that was still at least fifty pounds too many. Clearly, he was there for the taking.

I looked at my daddy, whose glance was fixed on his old friend. "Up to you, son," he said.

Felix reached into his pocket, produced a fat roll, and peeled off a bill.

I got two tens from my skinny wallet, rendering my treasury nil.

"Judge, will you hold the stakes?"

He said he would, and we passed over our wagers.

"Good enough," Felix said heartily. "All right now, in consideration of twenty-five years and all these pounds, I get to say Go, agreed?"

After shaking his outstretched hand I dropped into my sprinter's crouch, ready, willing, and eager to put an old fogy in his place.

The O.F. heaved his bulk off the rocker and tortoised his way to ground level. It was when he took his third unhurried step toward the fencepost that I realized what was being done to me.

"Not fair," I yelped.

Five yards short of the fencepost he turned. "Go!" he said, grinning.

Out of sheer fury I tried, but only a sudden coronary or a partisan lightning bolt could have changed the course of events. Neither happened.

Felix strolled back to collect his money. Daddy handed it over and said mildly, "End of the line, Br'er Foxx."

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Felix nodded. "Figured as much. Going to miss you, Judge."

And though they spent another hour equably enough, comparing dogs and hunting rifles, Felix never did set foot on that porch again. Or for that matter in my father's courtroom.

When Daddy died, eight years later, his funeral drew a lot of folk and a lot of flowers. Felix's wreath was among the biggest. And he sat in the second row, I remember, just behind my mom, patting her shoulder and looking like he'd lost his best friend.

Since then Felix Foxx has won himself four more elections, bringing his total to twelve, which in Black Rock County adds up to nearly a quarter century of useful service.

Useful? Well, there's that Tara look-alike he owns on ten acres just outside of Galway, our county seat. There's the pair of daughters he's sent to fancy colleges in the East, and let's not forget all those other little Foxxes (cousins and nephews) to whom he's given employment through the years.

He used to insist it was his wife's money that paid for most of the extras until Edna Mae made him stop. It sounded, she once told her garden club, as if Garretson bucks were the sole reason Felix had married her, which everybody knows is the case, of course. The Garretsons have owned banks in these parts since before the Revolutionary War. And going back at least that far, Garretson women had set standards for plain looks and bad temper.

Edna Mae is in the tradition. She once flung a five-pound weight at the window of her daddy's Galway branch because some teller, foolhardy as he was upright, figured a bouncing check might be educative. Old man Garretson had the window fixed and the teller fired, on direct orders from Edna Mae. Educative, sure enough.

Edna Mae's the only person in Black Rock who regularly cuts Felix down to size. Her size. She's a little woman, five one, 110 soaking wet, but when her nostrils whiten and her tiny fists tighten, her hulk of a husband shuffles his feet, runs thick fingers around his collar, and acts just like he wasn't a legend in his own time.

On occasion, LaMar tries to demythify him, too. He'll break out in blistering editorials detailing Felix's forays into graft, bribery, and double-dipping. Felix shrugs these off as not only mendacious but mean-spirited. And he's got this really cute put-

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upon sigh which he trots out now and again for the sympathetic patrons at Minnie O's.

Lately, of course, there's an added starter in the demythifying field. Me. Going around the county armed with LaMar's litany of larceny, I demythify strenuously.

Do my fellow citizens believe me?

Sure they do. Show me a bright two-year-old, and I'll show you a kid who knows Felix Foxx is corrupt beyond redemption.

"Felix is Felix," Minnie told me the day I got started, a representative comment—though Minnie, for reasons that will come clear later, isn't exactly a representative case. "No, he's not as honest as, say, LaMar Hunnicut, but he's a lot more fun. And he sure knows how to keep a body safe." Flexing part of hers to underscore the value of the service.

And that much *is* true. Felix and his twenty-five deputies (currently only a baker's dozen are nephews) do keep the law-and-order lid on, but at a cost that could activate the NYPD.

"Minnie," I said, "how'd you like a serious reduction in your property tax. *Serious.*" I put forward a percentage. "Just from what I won't steal."

And, you know, about the fourth or fifth time I held her still for my siren song a look came into her eyes, the look of a natural businesswoman.

A look I've been seeing in rising numbers around the county. Cupidity, some might call it, even downright greed. I called it a confidence-builder. And a lesson in practical politics. I'd been learning what I'll bet my forerunners knew back in the caves—that for impressing the hell out of an electorate, there's nothing like a red-hot pocketbook issue.

And what I'd been learning about elections in general, Felix Foxx had been learning about this one, count on it.

He'd disappeared, had he?

I didn't think so—not for a New York minute.

Actually, it was the ding in my right rear—which of course didn't come about the way Deputy Bethune said it did—that had first set me thinking.

Emerging from a diner in Galway—about three in the afternoon, not eleven at night, nowhere near Route 40 or Bedford Pike—I'd come upon the ding. After studying it a bit, it began to seem a ding of a different color; that is, one produced by a mallet as opposed to a collision.

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Add that to the shift in the political winds, and my guess was Felix had set about "doing whatever needs doing."

I looked at my watch. Still about ten minutes before LaMar could arrive. Why not wake up Barney Cox, I asked myself—rhetorically, since I'd already decided that was a good idea.

Blearily, Barney acknowledged that he had what I'd hired him for. Yeah, it would do the job, he thought. And sure he could bring the stuff over if I really needed him to, but did I know what time it was? I told him I did and that there'd be a crack-of-dawn bonus to sweeten the pot. He purred contentedly and said he was on his way. After hanging up, I called him again to make sure he hadn't purred himself back to sleep. He had, but promised not to again.

I went outside to look at the moon to see if that had disappeared, too.

Three minutes later, with his customary screech of brakes, LaMar made the scene. But not alone. Of all people, Fay Carteret Loomis was with him.

And out she came firing—before LaMar's BMW had stopped spinning its wheels, I swear.

"All right," she said, swinging a suitcase in my general direction while she went back for another, "I'm home. I'll bet the place is a pigsty."

"It isn't."

Which she ignored. "You never did know how to take care of things, Roy Loomis. If it wasn't dark I bet I'd see what a jungle you've got growing here."

"I paid young Jamie Anderson to look after your garden."

"Where are my tomatoes? I bet there isn't a single one of them left alive. And I shudder to think of the condition my glads might be in."

I stood up and started back into the house.

That got LaMar into the act. "Damn you, Roy, you better listen to Fay. Considering the mess you're in, you need all the support you can get."

"I'll listen to her whenever she's ready to talk to me. Fay, why are you back?"

"Because you're in trouble, you fool. Why else?"

And in the next minute she was in my arms, sobbing fit to kill, and she felt so good there I told her if I'd known what a remedy trouble would be I'd have arranged for some long since.

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I sat her down on the steps and put my arms around her, holding her close. "Okay, LaMar, what kind of mess am I in?"

"Sam Bethune's telling it you're a murder suspect."

When I felt Fay shiver against me I held her closer and made shushing noises.

"Bethune now says the two witnesses who saw Felix deck you then heard you threaten to kill him. Is that true?"

"Nope. Go on."

"Go on? All right, Roy, I'll go on. From where I'm standing, dark as it is, I can see a dinged fender on that jalopy of yours."

"It's dinged, all right."

LaMar swore under his breath.

Fay burrowed into me.

"Roy," LaMar said, "I'm not quitting on you no matter how big the mess is, but I got something to ask you point-blank. Now I know you didn't kill anybody, but did you have anything to do with Felix's disappearance?"

Not being sure just how to answer that, I kept on smoothing Fay's hair and kissing her forehead occasionally while I tried to work something out. That made LaMar mad, and he kicked his BMW tire to show me.

"Let's just wait a bit," I said finally.

"For what? For hell to freeze over? For Bethune to come marching up here with maybe six friends in white sheets?"

"For Barney."

He blinked. "Will you tell me what the Sam Hill you're talking about?"

LaMar's banty stance and slung-out jaw was now making me as mad as he was. "Felix's disappearance isn't a real disappearance, damn it. It's meant to discredit me and win him an election. I mean, who wants a murderer for a sheriff? Most any electorate will put up with a crook, of course, but a killer? That's a bit much. Anyway, after the votes are counted—me on the short end—he'll turn up full of explanations. A sudden secret mission for the President of the United States; a short-term bout with amnesia. Does it matter? We're talking vintage Br'er Foxx. Only this time it's not going to work."

"It's not?"

"No way."

Fay stood up then and said, "I think I'll do myself a favor and not listen to the rest of this just now. You don't mind, do you, shug?"

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I shook my head.

After a couple of steps, however, she turned, came back, and kissed me. "But you can tell me about it later if you want to, all right?"

I grinned and said it was.

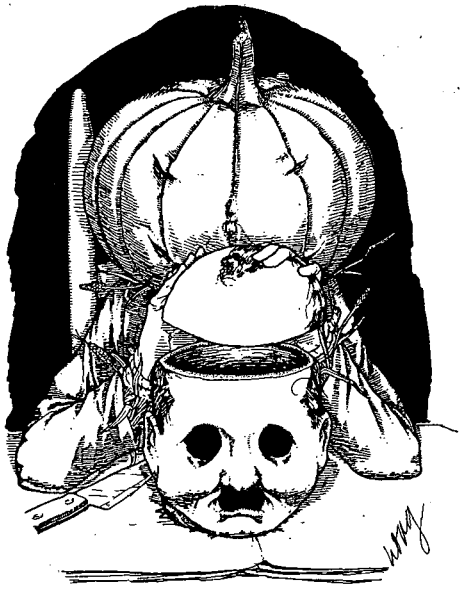
In the meantime LaMar had been studying me. "You know where Felix is, don't you?"

I nodded. "At Minnie's. That pretty little cottage she has out beyond Galway? White picket fence? Nice little rose garden? Private little swimming pool—private enough for skinny-dipping or sportive behavior in general. I set Barney on Felix's tail right after Deputy Bethune or a designated hitter took a mallet to my fender." I paused. "Barney and his telephoto lens."

LaMar studied me some more, then his eyes widened. "You're going to threaten to show pictures to Edna Mae. By God, you're going to blackmail Felix into quitting."

"It's called doing whatever needs doing," I said.

Now I don't think LaMar was as shocked as he pretended to be, because he knows me so well. A lot better than Felix Foxx does. ●



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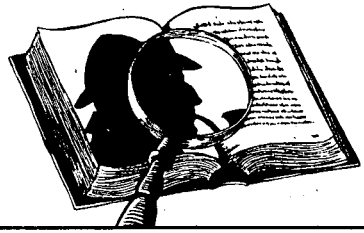

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Out of the Woods

by Henry Slesar

Trumbull was bewildered by the city, by the sea of people who never seemed to notice him. Except on the day he shot and killed the off-duty police officer, pumping his own gas in the station Trumbull had decided to rob.

It had been only three weeks since he had left the Oregon woods. A city girl with a mocking smile had hired him as guide, and in the deep of the forest had suddenly kissed him and told him he was cute. Trumbull was struck dumb with love, and decided to give up the only life he knew.

She didn't even recognize his name when he called. He took his misery to a shabby hotel and watched his money disappear. Broke and desperate, he bought a cheap handgun. When the cop ran at him, he discovered that it was loaded.

Every newspaper featured a police sketch of his face, chillingly accurate. He stiffed the hotel and took a bus back home.

Nobody in the small town of Culver seemed to know Trumbull had been gone. He was relieved to see that Culver's only hotel was crowded. The weather was good, and there was a convention in town, and as soon as he walked into the lobby, Sonny, the manager, asked if he wanted a job.

"His name's Potter," Sonny said. "He's just checking in now." He nodded towards the front desk, at a tall, sad-eyed

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man in his late twenties.

Trumbull was hesitant about showing his face, but he had no choice. He introduced himself and said he would meet Potter in the lobby at seven the next morning.

He was just walking off when he heard the words of the desk clerk, words that seemed to open the floor beneath him.

"May I see your badge, Mr. Potter?"

He turned and watched Potter slip his wallet from a back pocket, flipping it open.

Trumbull had drawn a cop.

He slept only half the night, trying to decide what to do. If he didn't show up, wouldn't that make Potter suspicious? And maybe he had never even seen his Wanted poster.

Potter didn't talk much as they entered the woods. It made Trumbull uneasy. He began to jabber himself, spilling all the woodsy lore he knew. When they reached the crest called Indian Point, they unpacked their lunch, and Trumbull gaped.

There was a newspaper in Potter's backpack, and Trumbull's face looked out at him.

It might not have been a conscious plan that made Trumbull do what he did next. He took Potter down the most poorly marked trail he knew. When it finally vanished into the undergrowth, Potter began to look concerned. They turned in another direction, but it only led deeper into a dank darkness. Potter began to look worried, but Trumbull smiled.

"It's all right," he said. "Just stay here and I'll come right back for you."

"Where are you going?"

"Going to find a ridge, get our bearings. Be back before you know it."

He knew the forest from childhood, but it was six hours before he found his way out of the woods, in more ways than one. Because he knew policeman Potter would never see the treeless sunlight again . . .

He didn't report the disaster immediately. First he rehearsed his story about Potter "wandering off," about his desperate but futile seach. . . .

It was almost morning when he staggered into the hotel lobby. When he saw Potter sitting on the lumpy sofa, talking to the town's only two policemen, Trumbull's knees quivered. One was holding the newspaper, and all three were looking in his direction. When the handcuffs were closing around his wrist, Trumbull could only gasp out one word.

"How?"

How did Trumbull get caught? *Turn to page 158 for "The Final Paragraph."*

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Art by Steve Cavallo

A WITCH AND HER CATS

by Antonia Fraser

At first Jemima Shore thought that the elderly woman was shaking due to the frailty of age. It was bakingly hot outside. For a moment Jemima wondered if the woman, a stranger, was ill, faint, needing water. Then Jemima realised that she was trembling with anger. The woman—seventy-something? Eighty?—was standing on the doorstep, very close to the door itself, when Jemima answered the bell.

"Mine, mine," she was saying, or rather gasping, as if the strength of her anger was robbing her of breath. "How dare you . . . evil, wicked . . . How dare you? Mine, mine." The torrent of words, some of which Jemima could hardly make out, continued for a while. Then, when she was apparently exhausted, the woman shook her fist in Jemima's face.

Amid her general astonishment, Jemima had time to reflect that this was something that had never happened to her before.

© 1995 by Antonia Fraser

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Fist-shaking belonged to the world of melodrama: Outside the opera, Jemima did not think she had ever seen the gesture performed seriously before. She certainly did not expect to open the door of a London house and encounter such a histrionic denunciation.

Part of Jemima's shock was due to the fact that the woman, quite apart from her imprecations, did have a distinctly witchlike appearance. And she was certainly behaving in a traditional witch's fashion: that is to say, cursing. In principle, Jemima was dead against labeling older women as witches simply because they had become skinny and wrinkled with age, had started maybe to mutter aloud aggressively, due to loneliness or disappointment. That was misogynist stereotyping at its worst and quite intolerable. On the other hand, when you were confronted with a shaken fist and a stream of invective issuing from an elderly female, bowed and scraggy in her black dress, with sparse grey hair in a bun and two long prominent front teeth, it was difficult to suppress the instant reaction buried in childhood memories of fairy stories: This was a witch.

At this point Jemima suddenly realised who her caller must be. This was Miss Pollard. Jemima had had that very conversation about the cruelty of describing elderly ladies as witches only a week ago. She had ticked off her goddaughter Claudia for referring to their neighbour as "that old witch" only to have Claudia mutter rebelliously: "Old bat, then." But still, Jemima was confident that her point had been made. And now the old witch/bat was gibbering in front of her (as Claudia would have put it). For the invective had started again and what was more, the voice was growing stronger. . . .

Antonia Fraser had already earned a reputation as an historian before she started writing the Jemima Shore mysteries with which most crime readers associate her name. She is a prize-winning biographer and the editor of a series of books about the kings and queens of England. Yet in Jemima Shore she's created a heroine who's thoroughly up-to-date, especially when it comes to dealing with witches. ¶

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It was the emergence of the words "cats . . . my cats! Mine, mine . . . my cats" which gave Jemima at last her clue to what this was all about. Rosy and Rusty, the adorable young marmalade cats—not much more than kittens, really—to whom Claudia had taken such a fancy.

Jemima did not actually own the house in Edwardes Terrace, West London, in which she was currently living, a tall, narrow house, with a long thin garden at the back. Recently there had been an insidious unchecked flood in her own mansion flat while Jemima was away. The result had been not only the ruin of carpets and furniture but also the destruction of floors. The only thing to do was to move out entirely while builders wrestled with the damage. And the Edwardes Terrace house—although larger than Jemima wanted—had been available for instant rental.

It was at this point that Claudia Farrow had come to join Jemima. The Farrow parents' ever-troubled marriage was finally coming to an end, and the fallout was considerable. Alexa Farrow did not wish her daughter to witness it. So Jemima, as a gesture of godmotherly solidarity, offered to have Claudia to stay until times were calmer. With Claudia came her nanny/au pair, Maureen. And with Maureen, a good deal of the time, came her boyfriend Johnnie. After that, Jemima reflected drily, the house did not seem in any way too large.

Maureen herself was quite a withdrawn character. She had the kind of ample—not exactly fat—figure which Jemima presumed must give a sense of security to a child; but she certainly could not be described as a jolly, comfortable person. Her hair, brownish and not very thick, was scraped back into a severe ponytail; her face was pale and rather square.

Johnnie the boyfriend was undoubtedly far better looking for a man than Maureen for a woman. He also sported a ponytail, but his was a macho masculine ponytail, which set off his neat, slightly wolfish features. Johnnie's only flaw in terms of appearance was in fact that very neatness: He was a little shorter than the lavish Maureen. At the same time, Johnnie was extremely muscular, as Jemima could not help noticing from the skimpy clothes, vest and shorts, he generally wore in the hot weather. Either Johnnie's building job had done that for him or else he worked out. Any six-foot man would have been proud of Johnnie's biceps.

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If Maureen was inclined to be silent, Johnnie was immensely voluble. The roar of Johnnie's exuberant chatter, pitched to be heard above the television which was also blaring away in the kitchen, caused Jemima much secret annoyance. So this was the way the world had gone: How was she to know that children nowadays had a double escort of nanny and boyfriend? She was herself childless, and Claudia was the nearest she had to a surrogate child. But having made her generous offer to Alexa Farrow, she could hardly start upsetting her domestic arrangements.

"Maureen is a bit glum," was how Alexa had put it. "And not wildly intelligent. But you won't have any trouble with her. Claudia is used to her," Alexa had summed up. "And that's important in this situation, isn't it?" The topic of Maureen was dismissed. Alexa had not mentioned Johnnie at all. "Oh Jem," she rattled on, "I'm so grateful to you. You see, I can just about cope with all my future ex-husband's vindictiveness by myself, but having to cope with Claudia—" Alexa was right back into the impossibility of life with Claudia's lying, cheating father.

Claudia was thin, over-thin perhaps for an eight-year-old, although once again Jemima was not certain exactly what an eight-year-old should look like. She had an anxious face and dark hair inclined to droop over her forehead. There was something touching about her: Indeed, her very anxiety moved Jemima.

The saving grace of the situation in Edwardes Terrace was Claudia's great love of the little golden cats. Jemima, a cat lover, guessed them to be about four months old (she realised that at thirty-something she knew rather more about cats and their ways than she did about children). Rosy and Rusty still retained all the grace and playfulness of kittenhood, yet were large and lithe enough to go adventuring over the walls of the terrace gardens. From the top floor of the house where Claudia and Maureen slept (and perhaps Johnnie too, though Jemima hoped not) she could sometimes trace the cats' progress over this wall and that. There would be a flash of golden fur, a gleam of white (one cat had a white face, front, and paws), and then another yellow streak as the second cat followed the first. They were always together.

The first time the two cats appeared on the narrow lawn of Jemima's house and began to gambol with each other, Claudia gave such a piercing scream that Jemima thought she had hurt

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herself and came running down from her study. But it was a scream of pleasure. Even Maureen allowed herself one of her rare smiles at the enchanting sight of the cat-kittens rolling over and over, biting, cuffing, licking, hugging, pawing each other.

Perhaps Claudia's first words to Jemima should have warned her of possible troubles ahead: "Oh Jemima, can I keep them? I've always wanted to have a kitten, Mum said that one day I would have a kitten, and now there are two kittens—" Claudia was hugging now one cat, now the other. Her pinched little face was flushed with happiness.

"Darling," said Jemima gently, "I think we'd better find out where they come from. Look, they've got collars." She took the cat with the white face from Claudia and checked the inscription on the medallion which hung, together with a small bell, from the red collar. Rosy, together with her all-gold brother Rusty. Names but no telephone numbers or address.

"Some milk," Claudia was saying importantly. She cradled both cats together in her arms and headed for the kitchen, which had a glass extension built out into the garden. Jemima hesitated, and decided it would do no harm. Claudia played happily with the cats for the rest of the afternoon and refused to go for a walk in Holland Park. Once again Jemima decided that would do no harm.

She did, however, ban Claudia from having the cats to sleep in her bedroom. When Claudia went to bed, just about the time that Johnnie came round for his evening session of chat 'n television, Rosy and Rusty were put firmly back into the garden.

"Jolly little fellows," said Johnnie approvingly. "Although I'm a dog man myself. Something big. Man-sized. You know, it's an odd thing, but big dogs are much more affectionate than small ones. When I get another job,"—he was currently unemployed—"I'll get a dog." Jemima wondered nervously if Johnnie might be referring to a pit bull.

The next morning, quite early, Jemima looked out of her second-floor bedroom window and saw the small figure of Claudia, still in her pink pyjamas, skipping about in the garden.

"Rosy, Rusty," she was calling. Jemima rather thought that Claudia had something in her hand, food perhaps. There was no sign of Maureen. Jemima turned away, wondering what to do—she had to go to the studio early to do some dubbings for her new television series and would not be back until late. She

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decided to rouse Maureen, who was both sleepy and surprised—but finally quite sensible.

"She's that excited about the little cats. And you said she would see them again in the morning. So I suppose that when she woke up . . . but don't worry, it won't happen again."

It didn't happen again. At least not exactly like that. But Claudia's obsession with the cats grew and grew. Jemima really believed the little girl thought about nothing else. The drawings she did, at Maureen's suggestion, for Jemima's return from work were entirely of cats, bright yellow cats, since the delicate gold of their fur was impossible to reproduce by crayon. Claudia's letters to her parents, also at Maureen's suggestion, were also concentrated on the same topic. And that was how the argument about the term "the old witch" came about.

One of Claudia's unfinished letters was lying on the kitchen table when Jemima got home. The weather was still so stifling and humid that Jemima's first instinct on her return was to fling open the glass doors of the kitchen-conservatory and breathe deeply in the night air. She had planted some tobacco plants in the decaying tubs by the glass doors—rented houses never had very thrilling gardens—and Jemima stood enjoying their subtle nocturnal scent.

There were various night sounds to be heard in the semidarkness: In the heat, most of the back windows of the houses along the terrace were open. There was at least one television set on, but the noise was low enough not to be a real annoyance. That was fortunate, since the terraced houses were all so narrow as to be really close together: From an upper window the various gardens looked like one big green area, punctuated by moderate-sized brick walls. There were about twenty-five houses all told. A few of the houses right at the end of the row backed into some kind of mews. But most of them, including Jemima's own centrally placed house, faced a large, high brick building with a flat roof. It looked as if it had been erected in the sixties. There were no windows facing into the gardens, no doubt due to some planning rule or other. Although some of the residents over the years had grown creepers up the blank wall, the effect was still rather prisonlike. Jemima's end wall, for example, simply had a flight of stone steps leading nowhere, and another decrepit tub, into which she had injected some white geraniums, at the top of them.

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If the effect was slightly daunting, you could also say that Edwardes Terrace was extemely private—secure even, so far as a house in London could ever be really secure. An interloper seeking to enter Jemima's house from the back would have to cross a great many walls to do so. Like the golden cats, in fact. . . . Jemima looked speculatively into the darkness. But no cat slithered down to join her. Where were the cats now? How many walls did they cross to get to her garden? For that matter, who did they belong to?

The answer to Jemima's questions was contained, in a manner of speaking, in Claudia's unfinished letter on the kitchen table.

"The old wich (sic) got cross with me again today about the cats," she read. "She's so scarry (sic). She lives at No. 18."

At that moment, as if on cue, Jemima heard a thin, reedy voice calling somewhere outside. "Rosy, Rusty, where are you? Ros-ee, Rust-ee." A witch calling for her cats. (She would of course have to speak to Claudia about her letter in the morning.) At least the inhabitants of No. 16 were not guilty this time. The conservatory doors had been firmly closed, according to instructions, when Jemima returned. She could listen to the old witch—*woman*—calling without feeling embarrassed. She could also feel without shame that there was something distinctly querulous about the persistent, nagging calling.

Jemima's complacency was shattered about five minutes later when the all-gold cat streaked out from beneath the kitchen counter and headed for the open doors: The white-faced cat followed.

Oh my God! thought Jemima. Wicked Claudia. Or should it be wicked Maureen? Tones of ecstasy, mixed with wails of reproach, echoed across the garden as the cats and their owner were reunited.

"Naughty cats! Where have you been? Did the horrid little girl get you?" At least, reflected Jemima, the cats had no language in which to answer that question: They could not give away the guilty inhabitants of No. 16. The next morning Jemima happened to be working at home. She took the opportunity to give Claudia that mild little lecture about the word "witch." Furthermore, the cats from No. 18 were never, ever to be locked into No. 16.

Maureen stood impassively by while this scene was being enacted in the kitchen. And as it happened, Johnnie was there too.

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At the time, Jemima felt some annoyance at his presence. But then she thought that Johnnie too might benefit from listening. Perhaps it had been Johnnie who, out of unthinking good nature, had helped Claudia, as he saw it, to "adopt" the cats.

Jemima forgot about Rosy and Rusty. Work at the office became, all of a sudden, extremely demanding. At the same time, her builders wanted a series of decisions. Claudia and Maureen appeared to enjoy an innocuous school-holidays routine of shopping, walks, trips for ice cream and other expeditions, hiring suitable videos mainly made by Walt Disney, all cosily based on Edwardes Terrace. So far as Jemima could establish, Johnnie was slightly less in evidence. Maybe he had a job? Or maybe something of Jemima's inner irritation had conveyed itself to Maureen.

And now there she was, all of a sudden, facing Claudia's scary witch on her own doorstep. In pursuit of her cats. The ghastly thing was that Jemima could not honestly promise that the cats were not in the house. Her visible irresolution had the effect of encouraging Miss Pollard. She stepped into the hall of the house and gave a series of eldritch shrieks up the stairs.

"Rosy, Rusty, where are you? Come to your mother." Jemima found herself praying that no answer would follow from upstairs. It was quite late: something after nine o'clock, and Maureen (and Johnnie) were watching television in the kitchen. She devoutly hoped that Claudia was asleep upstairs—alone and catless. Her prayer was not answered. Almost immediately, to her horror, Claudia's bedroom door opened. There was a light skittering sound, followed by the characteristic small tinkle which always indicated the arrival of the cats. Rosy and Rusty streaked down the stairs, there was a series of sharp mews, and Miss Pollard gathered both cats up into her arms.

A wail came from above her head. Claudia, once more in those pink pyjamas, was standing on the landing, rubbing her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" she began. The sight did not move Miss Pollard.

"You wicked little girl! You will indeed be sorry for this, I can assure you of that. Just wait and see. I'm going to curse you. Bad things are going to happen to you because of what you've done. You'll see."

It was an extraordinary scene; for some reason, despite her good sense, Jemima found it quite menacing. She stood frozen,

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listening to the child crying and looking, as if mesmerised, at the woman clutching her cats. Then, as Claudia's cries became hysterical, Jemima realised she must leap into action.

"Miss Pollard, she's only a child." Jemima spoke as politely as possible, although she did not feel particularly polite. "I apologise on her behalf now, and she will write you a note tomorrow, and so will I, and so, I expect, will her mother. Claudia will not touch the cats again, I promise you that. But as for now, I can't help feeling you must be longing to get home with your cats."

Miss Pollard ignored Jemima. She continued to stare up at the retreating little girl in that disconcerting and rather horrible fashion. After a moment she transferred her gaze to Jemima. Jemima had an impression of a deep malevolence.

"I curse you too," said Miss Pollard in a quieter voice. "I know who you are from television. I curse you too."

Miss Pollard left and Jemima rushed upstairs. When she got to Claudia's room, she could see nothing but a dark head huddled under the duvet. And Claudia, beneath her duvet, was shuddering with sobs.

"Claudia, dear, don't cry. I'll talk to Mum. You'll get a kitten—two kittens if you like—for Christmas, when everything at home is sorted out."

"I'm frightened," Claudia whispered. She finally fell asleep holding Jemima's hand. Later Jemima went rather thoughtfully down into the kitchen and found Maureen and Johnnie still watching the television, the sound having masked all outside noises. Jemima related what had happened—leaving out the curse—and emphasised that on no account were the cats to be allowed into the house or garden of No. 16.

"You must shoo them away."

Maureen said nothing. It was Johnnie who promised ardently: "Oh, we will, we will." Jemima walked past them into the hot, dark garden, closing the glass doors behind her. She walked to the end, mounted the steps, and leaned against the blank wall. There were no lights, none at all, to be seen in No. 18. Had Miss Pollard simply gone to bed with her cats? The garden windows—big french windows—were firmly shut. A flicker of light caught Jemima's eye. Jemima realised that whatever Miss Pollard was up to in No. 18, she was up to it by candlelight. Jemima could just make her out sitting at a table. For some reason, she found that whole scene even more disquieting.

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It was shortly after that evening that everything in Jemima's life started to go wrong. It was as though—but that was perfectly ridiculous—some curse really had been put upon her. For example, there was a problem with the sound on one of the programs in her new series and no one could fix it, which left everyone blaming everyone else in an edgy way for what looked like being an expensive mistake. No sooner was that crisis surmounted, at some cost, than Cherry, Jemima's longtime assistant and now partner in her production company, broke her wrist playing tennis and was forbidden even to raise her right hand. Given Cherry's mastery of their new computer, this was another disaster.

Jemima herself completely forgot to turn up for an important lunch date of a professional nature, something which had never happened to her before. To cap it all, on the very same day, Jemima's builders mixed up their instructions and painted the bathroom the rich sombre colour intended for the hall. It was not a day to remember. Jemima finally reached Edwardes Terrace having visited Cherry, sent flowers and apologies to her lunch date, and sorted out the builders.

She found herself confronted by both Maureen and Johnnie—not exactly the relaxing welcome Jemima actually wanted. She then understood Maureen to say: "Oh, it's been murder here today." Had Claudia been mischievous? Had there been yet another incident with the cats?

It took a moment for Jemima to understand, let alone take in, what Maureen was actually saying: *"We've* had a murder here today," were Maureen's words. This horrifying message finally sank in.

"The old witch, Miss Pollard." Was it Jemima's imagination, or was Johnnie giving one of his wolfish grins? If so, what extraordinary taste he was displaying. "Found dead, she was. In her own kitchen. Like ours. You can see into it from the garden. I saw her in the morning, pitched forward onto the table. There was a candle burning. Thought she was asleep, drunk, some of these old ladies take to the bottle, you know. The unmarried sort. Watch out, Jemima—" Johnnie gestured cheekily in the direction of the empty wine bottles (not a few, it had to be said) which were lined up by the sink, awaiting delivery to the bottle bank.

Jemima was not to be diverted, although she did give Johnnie—who was incidentally clutching a can of lager—a frosty glance.

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"Go on."

"Like this. It's me that called the police. Me and Maureen. In the evening. You were still out. Didn't know when you'd be back. Because she hadn't moved. The candle was right down. Had gone out. And I could see the cats running, jumping everywhere in that kitchen. They were going mad. And that didn't seem right. So—" He hesitated and looked at Maureen—"So we talked about it, didn't we, Maureen, and I called the police."

Johnnie's neighbourly solicitude for Miss Pollard did him credit; so did his concern for the cats. The trouble was that Jemima did not believe him. That is to say, she believed parts of his story, including the candle burning on the table, something which she had seen for herself. But the overall story had an odd ring to it. Jemima's instinct—that famous instinct, feminine or gender-free, on which she prided herself—told her that Johnnie was lying.

Her suspicions increased half an hour later when the police, in the person of Detective Inspector Gary Harwood from the local station, called round. Detective Inspector Harwood was young, pink-cheeked, very clean looking, and had a professionally easy manner on which he evidently prided himself. It did not take Jemima long—after all, she also had a professionally easy manner on which she prided herself—to discover the main facts of the case. These were roughly as Johnnie had reported, with one significant exception. Miss Pollard was indeed dead. But the house at No. 18 had also been burgled.

"Robbery with violence!" exclaimed Jemima.

"We haven't established the cause of death yet. But yes, robbery. We want to have another word with your Mr. Johnnie Johnson as a result. An old friend of ours, by the way."

"*My* Mr. Johnnie Johnson? You mean—"

"Recognised him at once. Makes a habit of it. Stupidly he tends to concentrate on this area. Makes life easier for us poor overworked policemen." The detective inspector flashed Jemima a smile: His teeth were amazingly regular and very white in contrast to the ruddy cheeks.

Jemima's mind reeled. Johnnie a burglar? A burglar who, as Detective Inspector Harwood now jauntily told her, made a speciality of getting to know young nannies or au pairs, and then robbing the house next-door or thereabouts.

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"It gets him access, you see," the policeman added. "It's amazing what latitude you career women will allow your nannies. You take up the references about the nannies, and never ask about the boyfriends."

The moment to disabuse the detective inspector as to Claudia's parentage—and Maureen's real employer—was fast approaching. Nevertheless, Jemima took the point. She had simply taken the egregious Johnnie for granted, only too happy that the sullen Maureen had company. Jemima hardly looked forward to breaking this news to Alexa Farrow: It was going to be difficult not to speak in tones of reproach, just as Harwood was speaking to her now. How feckless Alexa had been! Or had she simply succumbed to modern customs? Being too busy, fraught, and unhappy herself to pay close attention to the most vital aspect of her private life. Jemima, being childless, simply didn't know.

She decided to concentrate on the immediate present.

"Murder!" cried Jemima. "He's a killer. What's he doing free? You say he's done this before—" With all her liberal principles, Jemima found herself seized with total indignation at the idea of such a situation.

"No, no, wait a minute. Don't misunderstand me. Johnnie Johnson is not a killer, he's a thief, if you like, a minor thief. But no killings involved, no muggings. Not even a very bright burglar. The kitchen was covered in his prints. But nothing even near the body. He's a chancer, sees the opportunity, can't resist taking it. But then he goes and telephones us! Thinking that makes him innocent. Johnnie Johnson!" The detective inspector shook his well-brushed head with something approaching tenderness.

So part of Johnnie's story was true. Jemima had a mental image of Johnnie, lithe and athletic, scaling the wall as the cats had done so often.

"The cats!" she exclaimed. "What's to happen to them?" Detective Inspector Harwood—it became clear that he was not a cat lover—did not seem to think that the cats were all that important. He murmured something about the R.S.P.C.A.

"We'll take them." Jemima took the decision without thinking. That is, she did not think about the reaction of Alexa: She did think of Claudia. At this, Detective Inspector Harwood began to look quite definitely irritated at having to concentrate on the issue of cats.

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"What have cats got to do with a death?" he asked plaintively. "They're not important."

It was only when the cause of Miss Pollard's death was established that he was obliged to change his mind. The cats were important, very important.

Miss Pollard had not been murdered by anyone, let alone done to death by Johnnie Johnson. (His stash of stolen goods was discovered without difficulty, neatly stowed under the bed of Claudia.) Miss Pollard had taken a large cocktail of pills and brandy. She had done so deliberately. She had stated that in a note found in her escritoire—forced open by Johnnie in search of plunder.

Coolly, Miss Pollard gave her reasons for taking her own life. It was not worth living, she wrote, without the company of her beloved cats, Rosy and Rusty. Yet her cats wanted to desert her for the company of younger people, like the little girl at No. 16. She had tried to make a home for them but they spent the day trying to escape. . . . Miss Pollard could see no way out but to take her own life. She put her cats' happiness above her own.

"Whoever cares for my cats after my death," Miss Pollard ended, "gets my blessing not my curse."

Jemima did not tell any of this to Claudia. She merely put her arms round her.

"You see now that Miss Pollard wasn't a witch," Jemima said gently. "She wanted you to care for her cats. She specially said so." Jemima edited the will to her own satisfaction.

"She was a witch, Jemima." Claudia spoke firmly, with new assurance. "I know she was. But there are good witches as well as bad, aren't there? And in the end she was a good witch."

To Jemima, it seemed as good a verdict as any on the sad, lonely death of Miss Pollard. She watched Claudia playing with the two golden cats, all her childish tension apparently gone. It was, in a way—wasn't it?—a happy ending.

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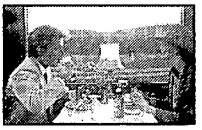

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SALVATION

by Milt McLeod

Remy's Surf Club happened to be nowhere near the surf. It was perched on the side of a ragged, garbage-strewn hill overlooking the Cayenne docks. And, as it was nowhere near the surf, neither was Remy's a real *club* of any exclusivity, other than via the criminal history of most of its patrons. You might say Remy's was just a seedy dive—only one with a view. But whatever Remy's was, it was Remy's.

The ramshackle structure itself had a floor of hard-packed earth and walls made of salvaged crates. Most of the light inside came from an open porch that looked out onto the indigo blue of the South Atlantic and three arid, sun-baked islands in the distance. At five degrees north of the equator, the sun there was nearly always up and merciless, and on that day, it reflected a golden light off what I later learned were the ochre walls of low block buildings that dotted those three islands.

I could see Remy at the far end of the bar, talking to a French sailor dressed in grimy whites. I guess I recognized him from

Although he is a published poet and serves as president of the Southwest Literary Arts Council, Milt McLeod has only recently tried his hand at fiction. This debut short story introduces a New Orleans police detective whom the author plans to feature in a series. Mr. McLeod makes his home in Houston, Texas, not The Big Easy of his story.

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Tony Copa's less than flattering description. Remy was a small, thin man—mid-fifties, maybe. He had the physical stature of an elf and the face of a ferret, with tiny bird-eyes and a rodent-like snout. Remy François was neither handsome nor terribly ugly. He was just peculiar-looking.

I felt a gnawing pity for the five or six lepers who had grouped themselves as a tight cadre in one dark corner. And in another corner, two shirtless Roucouyene Indians, their muscular chests adorned with purple tattoos, passed a bottle of rum between them. The rest of the mélange included a half-dozen maroons—mixed-race descendants of Indians and former African slaves—then a few Indochinese, an Arab or two, and the rest, mainly European and Latino expatriates.

Most of the people in Remy's were men, and nearly all wore cruel scars on their arms and faces: some proudly, no doubt, as badges of courage; others, as merely the grim reminders of some misfortune. Scattered among the men were an adequate supply of bar girls, some drunk, but others simply pretending, probably waiting for an opportune moment to palm some loose francs from an admirer's pocket.

I was feeling the need to relieve myself when I saw a door on the far wall that I knew wasn't the front door, and it wasn't the kitchen door either—'cause, thank God, this place didn't serve food. So I got up and walked toward that door, feeling as if at least a hundred eyes were watching me, but maybe it was only my imagination.

The door creaked on its makeshift hinges and slammed behind me with a loud bang, pulled shut by a rusty one-inch spring that looked as if it came off the relief valve of a ship's boiler. Inside the room, high on one wall, was a dirty window with a few missing panes that let in enough outside light to keep a person from stepping into one of the three dark holes in the floor.

But there were really four holes. I hadn't seen the one on the left, as there was an enormous man squatted over it, a man with a scarred face that could scare you, if it ever came close. The man's skin was a jaundiced, sickly yellow, and he had a misshapen head that looked like a huge squash, as if a part of his skull was missing. The T-shirt pasted to his sweaty body had a crude cartoon on the back showing two people copulating on the seat of a Harley.

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I knew I'd seen that T-shirt before. It had been stretched over that same hulk-of-a-man outside the Cayenne Airport. He'd been standing next to the taxi I'd gotten into with a hooker who had said that she too was headed for Remy's Surf Club. I remembered her Indochine features, but I guess I'd been preoccupied by the curious scar that marked her tanned skin with a thin, jagged ivory line that nearly circled her throat. I'd never seen a throat wound that long on anybody that lived.

The man grunted something unintelligible as he brushed past me, and I could swear he smiled. But that God-awful room with the holes in the floor was not the place to return anybody's smile, especially his. The room had seemed to me to be too small for both of us, and with the big man's leaving, I felt a welcome sense of relief, so that I could now relieve myself with a measure of peace.

Then all eyes were on me again as I let the door go and heard it bang. I walked back to my table, still uneasy, but anxious to meet this Remy François quickly, take care of my promise to Tony Copa, and get the hell out of this place, this town, this country or colony or whatever it was.

I'd left my Browning in a locker at the airport, and already I was missing its comforting feel against my left calf. On the flight to Cayenne, I'd heard two passengers talking about French Guiana—how nearly every living soul there had ancestors who were either criminals or cannibals or both. Maybe that was an overstatement, but looking at the faces lining the bar, I'd already begun to question my own sanity for agreeing to come here just to do a favor for a friend of a friend.

I'd been away from New Orleans for nearly four months—an N.O.P.D. detective on loan to the Brazilian Federal Police in São Paulo. Tony Copa and I had been working together on a murder case, but it was time for me to get back home. I figured by now my dog and maybe another friend or two might be missing me.

Just what the hell am I doin' in French Guiana? was what I was asking myself as Remy François walked toward me from the shadows at the far end of the bar. I knew the answer, of course. But I was still kicking myself for being so damned accommodating.

Just because I was on my way back to New Orleans, and French Guiana was *not that far out of the way* along my four-

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thousand-mile route, I'd promised Antonio Suarez, the Brazilian cop we called Tony Copa, that I would help out his friend Remy François by delivering something to New Orleans.

So why doesn't Remy either do it himself or use the mail? I hadn't gotten the answer to that one yet, but Tony had assured me that Remy would explain.

Remy was obviously expecting me. He stuck out a bony hand, and I shook it, with a degree of caution.

"Monsieur LeCroix?" he inquired.

"That's me," I said. "Just call me Nick. Mind if we speak English?"

"No problem, Nick," Remy said with a wide, gold-filled grin. "Say, I tended bar in the Big Easy a few years back. Lester Bergeron's Boogie Room. You know that place?"

"Sure do," I said. Then I thought about a favorite drink I'd had there: Remy's Sloe Gin Fizz. I was about to ask. . . .

He beat me to it. "Say, you ever had a sloe gin fizz—I mean at Lester's?"

"Yeah," I said. "You tellin' me you're *that* Remy?"

"You got it," he said. "My claim to fame, I guess."

I knew by then that Remy François and I were about to become old friends.

Now French Guiana was the last place on earth I'd ever have expected to run into an expatriate Cajun. I'd have figured, if a man's living in God's country already, he's not likely to want to move this close to hell. But here he was. It made me wonder a little, but I figured that if I hung around awhile—knowing the way most Cajuns like to talk—pretty soon Remy would tell me the whole story.

"You have any trouble findin' my place?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "That Indochine lady at the bar was headed here too. I think maybe she'd been workin' the lounge at the airport. We shared a taxi."

Remy shot me another grin. "Let me get you a drink, Nick."

"Do it, man," I said, knowing what it would probably be and thinking that two kinds of gin plus grenadine and club soda were probably safer than either the local beer or the water, not to mention the fact that I was about to imbibe a legendary potion as created by the man himself.

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Remy left for a few minutes and returned with two tall glasses filled to the rim with cracked ice and a pale red mixture that looked deliciously familiar.

"Let's go out in the daylight," he said.

That suited me just fine. Remy pointed out one of the cheap dinette-type tables on a far corner of the porch, and pulled up two empty cable spools for us to use as chairs. We sat down, and he raised his glass in a toast. I took his cue and raised mine.

"To salvation," he said.

Strange toast, I was thinking, when I saw Remy's glass arc wide in a flourish and point out to sea.

"Those islands," he said. "In French, folks call 'em the *Îles du Salut*. To us, they're the Salvation Islands. You know about 'em? Used to be French penal colonies."

"Heard some talk about 'em on the plane," I said. Then I motioned inside toward the bar. "From the looks of that crew in there, I'd say that most everybody in Cayenne must've moved here from those islands."

Remy slapped his thigh and let out a shrill laugh that caused everyone at the bar to look our way. I was beginning to wish I'd kept my comments to myself. Then he told me about the three islands—*Île Saint-Joseph, Île Royale,* and *Île du Diable*—France's most notorious former penal colonies, now tourist attractions and a popular docking spot for cruise ships.

For more than a century, Remy told me, French justice had meted out double sentences. The first was served on one of the three islands, imprisoned under the harshest conditions imaginable. The second sentence was served on the mainland of French Guiana as a *libéré,* only not so liberated as to be able to leave. Many of the ex-convicts intermarried with the only available women—Indian women of some of the fiercest tribes in South America—and stayed to live out their lives in the relentless heat and disease and danger of French Guiana.

We just talked trash for a while, Remy and me, LSU football and the latest skinny from the Quarter. I told him a little about me and what I'd been doing with Tony Copa in São Paulo. Remy responded by telling me how he came to be in French Guiana.

Remy was tending bar at the Boogie Room in '79 when Chino Canelli got whacked while sitting in his car on Rue Conti. The hit posed two major problems for Remy François.

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One—when the hit went down, Chino's car had been parked right in front of the Boogie Room. Two—Lester Bergeron, Remy's boss, had shorted Remy some money for working a few all-night parties. Remy was giving Lester a hard time, so Lester told Chino's old man Vinny—the Don himself—that Remy knew more about the hit than he was saying.

The next evening, while Remy was tending bar, Vinny's crew firebombed Remy's apartment on Rue Toulouse, just to get his attention. The next morning, Remy took what money he had out of the bank and left the Big Easy for good.

He drove to Miami, and from there flew down to Venezuela, where he worked the oil fields at Lake Maracaibo for a year or two. He made enough money to last him for a while, then started working his way east, along the coast. The oil-field work had given Remy some time to think. He knew where he had to go. There was some old family business that needed cleaning up in French Guiana.

Remy left the table to get us another round, and I braved the room with the holes in the floor one more time. When he returned with the drinks, Remy carried with him an old manila envelope. He set everything on the table, took a long, pale-red swallow, and reached inside the envelope, pulling out two old black-and-white photographs. He laid them side-by-side on the table, facing me.

"I'm gettin' close to talkin' about what I need you to do, Nick."

"I figured that was comin'."

"See this picture?" he said, pointing to a photograph of a man in merchant seaman's clothes with two tiny boys clinging to his legs.

The three of them were standing in front of a huge tree.

"That was taken in nineteen forty, in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana," said Remy. "You know where Breaux Bridge is, Nick?"

"Sure," I said, not wanting to hurt the man's feelings, because that's an unusual question for one Cajun to ask another. It's just been a long time since he was back in Louisiana, I was thinking.

"Love those crawfish," I said, "any way you want to cook 'em—étouffée, bisque, jambalaya—you name it. And you know, any Cajun who loves crawfish has probably spent some time in Breaux Bridge."

"Then I bet you know where that big tree is," said Remy.

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I thought a minute. "You mean that big old swamp oak at the fairgrounds? The one down by the water—right next to Bayou Teche?"

Remy smiled. "That's the one," he said. He hesitated for a second. "We'll talk about that tree later."

My mind was still on that old oak when I saw Remy's finger move to the three figures standing beneath the tree.

"The two boys in the picture are my brother Philippe and me," he said. "The man is our papa—Henri François."

Then Remy pointed at the other photograph. It seemed to be an old official photo of some kind—one showing a man seated on a bench wearing prisoner's stripes. The man was rail-thin, and his sunken eyes were set deep in his gaunt face.

"This one's also Papa," said Remy. "It was taken about ten years after the other one. The *surveillants,* the guards—they took it. Papa had just come from over there." He pointed toward the three islands in the distance.

I don't know why that came as such a surprise, but Remy must have read my expression.

"That's where Papa was," he said. "Nick, I want you to know some things about Papa Henri. It's important that you know, 'cause it's about what I'm gonna ask you to do."

Remy proceeded to tell me about Papa Henri François, how he was born in Chartres, France, about 1910, how he shipped out of Le Havre as a merchant seaman at age nineteen, and how in 1935, he landed at the Port of New Orleans and met some Cajuns who took him to a dance over at Breaux Bridge.

That's where Henri met Marie Gaudin, a local girl, whom he married the next year. They settled in a little cabin on Bayou Teche that Marie's folks gave them, and in another year, Remy was born. Two more years, and Philippe came along, but this time Marie developed complications during the birth, and she died.

The year was 1940, and that year, suffering in his loss, Papa Henri took the boys to stay with Marie's folks and shipped out again to Marseilles. On the return voyage, his ship made port at Fort St. Louis on Martinique. Henri was trying to drown his grief in the local rum when a thief tried to rob him. In a rage, Henri hit the man with a bottle and killed him.

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The magistrate declared Henri François a *transporté*—that's a murderer—and sentenced him to twenty years, ten to be served on those terrible islands and ten more on the mainland of French Guiana. That's where the photograph was taken.

"How did you learn all this?" I asked Remy.

"It's all public record," he said, "especially since the late forties, when the French closed the penal colonies. The records were moved to the archives here in Cayenne. I really think the officials have leveled with me, Nick. But it's still hard to believe how those men suffered."

Almost everybody tried to escape at least once, Remy told me. The conditions were that bad. Fifty men were confined to each barracks, with no light at all inside. They were allowed only two half-hour periods outside each day. If they didn't die from disease or kill each other in the darkness of the barracks, they would slip down to the beach and try to swim or raft to the mainland. Usually they would drown or fall prey to the sharks or both.

Escape was known as "going to meet La Belle." Those who failed to meet her and were captured might be beaten to death by the guards or executed with one of the three on-site guillotines or thrown into solitary in one of several cylindrical stone structures with only a three-inch opening for light.

Solitary was what happened to Papa Henri. The guards pulled him off a coconut-husk raft halfway to shore. They put him in one of those tiny stone rooms and locked him onto the *fer,* an iron horseshoe attached to a wooden bed. His only company for six months were the vampire bats that came to feed on his blood by biting his bare feet each night.

All this was interesting, of course, but I felt that Remy had to be suffering some just to tell me about it. I'd been watching his eyes, so I tried to hurry him along. "What finally happened to your papa?" I asked.

"He served his full ten years on the islands," Remy said. "Then he was brought to live on the mainland as a *libéré*, only he didn't live long. He died that same year of malaria."

"I'm sorry," I said, as if it had just happened.

"That brings me to what I need you to do, Nick," he said.

I just sat there, now anxiously waiting to find out what all this could possibly have to do with me.

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"The prison records contained Papa's will," Remy said. "He had nothing to leave Philippe and me, but he dearly wanted to go back home to Breaux Bridge."

I'm sure my eyes widened on hearing that. "You have his body?" I asked, fearful of the answer.

"His ashes," Remy said. "Just his ashes. He asked that they be buried under that big oak at the fairgrounds. There's a white flagstone there. I'd like to ask you to bury the urn under that stone. Will you do it?"

"Sure. But I'm curious, I guess. I know why *you* can't go back—the greaseballs never forget. But what about Philippe?"

"Philippe's got some big problems," said Remy. "I don't think he could handle doin' this right now. But he lives in Algiers, just across the river from the city—I'll give you the address. I'd like for you to let Philippe know—that is, after you put Papa where he said he wanted to be. When things settle down for Philippe, I know he'll want to go over there."

"I don't mind doin' that," I said. "Where's the urn?"

"Your hotel," said Remy. "The Hôtel des Palmistres. It's owned by a friend of mine. The urn's in your room, along with Philippe's address."

I went to sleep that night in the room that Remy had reserved for me, looking at the tall gray urn standing on the dresser. That night I seemed to dream the whole night: dreams of treachery and grief and loss and imprisonment and then the final dream, which must have come about dawn.

In that dream, Papa Henri was standing in his prisoner's stripes, but they were clean, and the white stripes were radiant. And next to him stood a faceless person in luminous white, and this person took Papa Henri's hand and offered it to me. And I thought to myself, even in this dream, that I had something important to do, and that what I was going to do would be good and profound, unlike the waste I'd made of my life so far.

The next morning, before checking out, I concluded that something with a loved one's ashes inside deserved a little privacy, so I placed the gray urn in a brown paper grocery sack and folded down the top. That sack was in my hand when I got into the taxi headed for the airport.

At the airport, I went straight to the locker and got the Browning, put it in my suitcase, and checked the suitcase at the Air

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France counter. Still carrying the sack with the urn inside, I flagged a uniformed airport security officer. He was a black man, unarmed, but carrying a truncheon. I identified myself and showed him my badge.

"I figured I ought to check in with you guys before I board," I said.

I followed the officer down a hallway and through a door to a security office, where he introduced me to his superior—a Captain Gadbois, an older black man wearing a white shirt and tie. The captain's coat hung on a rack next to his desk, and he wore his badge on the pocket of his shirt.

"What can I do for you, Detective?" he asked.

"I already checked my suitcase at the counter," I said. "There's a Browning .380 in it. I'm carrying no weapons on my person for this flight. The real reason I'm here is that I'd like to show you what's in this sack."

I opened the sack and handed it to him. He reached in and pulled out the urn.

"It's sealed," he said. "What's inside?"

"Just human ashes, as far as I know," I told him. "I trust the man who asked me to deliver this to New Orleans, but I've been a cop too long not to try to avoid gettin' blindsided, if you know what I mean. And because we're talkin' about the ashes of a friend's father, I wouldn't feel right about openin' the urn myself. But I also wouldn't want to get on that flight until somebody checked it out. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, Detective," the captain said.

"If it's okay," I said, "I'll just wait outside the door."

The captain nodded, and I stepped out into the hallway.

It was nearly a half-hour before the door opened and the officer came walking toward me, holding the sack with the top folded shut. He handed it to me.

"The captain said to tell you, 'Have a pleasant trip,' " the officer said.

I'll admit to breathing a sigh as I took the sack with the urn in it and headed for the departure area. But suddenly I saw, rounding the corner just ahead of me, something uncomfortably familiar.

It was the big man himself, the one with the misshapen head and the yellow skin and the same nasty T-shirt. He didn't look back as he continued down the hallway, the momentum from

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his enormous bulk hurling him from side to side in a lurching motion. At the end of the hallway, he disappeared into the wide expanse of the lobby.

When I came out of the hallway and into the lobby, I stopped next to a column and peered around it, trying to see where the big man had gone. I saw him standing at a public phone, one big yellow hand flailing the air, illustrating every word he spoke.

When the big man finished his conversation, I saw him exit the lobby to the outside walkway, where the taxis were lined up. There was a long floor-to-ceiling window there, and I could see his face pressed to the glass, the scars more contorted than ever—the ugliest human I'd ever seen.

I walked across the lobby to the departure area, glancing several times over my shoulder at the window. I could still see the big man there, his twisted face growing even more grotesque as he pressed it tighter against the glass, his eyes following my every move.

In what seemed like an hour, but probably was only a few minutes, I heard my flight number called out for boarding. I glanced at the front window one more time to see if he was still there, and he was, but next to the big man's ugly face, to my surprise, was the ferretlike face of Remy François.

Of course, I thought of Remy as a friend, but I was not at all sure about the big man, and I didn't have time right then to sort out all the strange goings-on. While I was considering whether to wave to Remy, my flight began to board, and an attendant took the boarding pass from my hand and guided me through the door to the tarmac.

Once seated on the Air France jet, I slid the brown paper sack under the seat in front of me and then settled back, breathing a long, slow sigh. I looked down at the sack and spoke in my mind to whatever part of Henri François might be left to listen: *We're leavin' this place, Papa Henri. You're goin' home.*

When the taxi pulled up in front of my little house in Gretna, I paid the driver, set my suitcase inside the front door, and carried the brown sack to my Ford pickup, which was parked in the driveway. Fortunately I'd called ahead and had LeBlanc's Texaco charge the battery and take the truck around the block a few times. After layovers in Sint Maarten and Miami, the day had been long and lazy, but there was still enough light to make

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it to Baton Rouge, then do some night driving to Breaux Bridge. I figured that the hours around midnight were probably the best time to do what I needed to do.

It was about 1:00 A.M. when I entered the fairgrounds. The area wasn't set up for any events, and the park was nearly deserted except for a few cars and pickups parked alone in the most shadowy places, where at least a century of lovers, including myself, had come to practice their night moves.

I drove down to the oyster-shell road that followed the winding course of Bayou Teche and pulled up next to the big old swamp oak that was in Remy's photograph—the same oak I remembered from my own youth. I took the brown sack, a shovel, and a flashlight from the pickup and walked down to the oak.

I shined the flashlight around the tree's base and, sure enough, there where Remy had said it would be was a white flagstone, about three feet across, set into the weeds. I'd picnicked under that oak dozens of times, and I didn't remember ever seeing it. I guessed that must have been before I became a cop trained to notice such things.

I levered the flagstone up with the shovel blade and slid the stone to one side. Then I dug a hole where the stone had been. I stopped digging at about two feet because of the tangles of roots. I opened the sack and lifted the urn out, then reverently lowered it into the hole. I backfilled the hole and slid the flagstone back into place.

As I was putting my things back into the pickup, I saw an old longneck Budweiser bottle lying in the weeds. I picked it up, went down to the bayou and filled it, broke off a small hibiscus branch covered with red flowers, stuck it down into the longneck bottle, and set the bottle on the stone.

"This one's for you, Papa Henri," I whispered, then headed back to the pickup.

Philippe François lived in a clapboard shack on Fifth Street in Algiers, in the shadow of the big Huey P. Long Bridge that spanned the Mississippi, right where Canal Street met the river. I saw the union bumper sticker on Philippe's rusted-out '82 Chevy and figured that he must work as a stevedore at the port, a job not unlike that of many of the patrons of Remy's Surf Club.

I'd thought about phoning first, but I couldn't find a number, which was not surprising after seeing the house. I knocked on the unpainted door and saw a man's hand part the dingy curtains on the front window. In a moment the door opened.

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Philippe François was the image of his slightly older brother, even down to the grin. Only there was no gold in Philippe's teeth—only rotted dark spaces—and there was a hollow look in his eyes, like he hadn't slept much.

"You must be Mr. LeCroix," he said. "I'd invite you in, but my daughter Lisette is real sick. Is it about the urn?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm here," I said. "I buried it under that big oak at Breaux Bridge—the one in the picture. Actually, I buried it under the flagstone, just like Remy asked me to do. He asked me to tell you. Said you'd want to know."

"Thanks," Philippe said. He started to say something else, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Then he turned away for a moment. When he turned back to face me, his face was wet with tears. He must have loved that old man a lot, just like Remy, I was thinking.

"Guess I'll be going," I said. "I hope Lisette gets well real soon. Anything serious?"

Philippe nodded. "She got hepatitis when she was a baby. She's ten now. Needs a new liver real bad."

Looking at Philippe was like looking at Remy, and I knew I liked Remy. Having never had any kids of my own, it troubled me somewhat that I could instantly feel concern for this man's daughter, whom I'd never even known existed. But I knew that I desperately wanted her to be okay.

"I see you're a union man," I said to Philippe. "Hear they have good insurance," I added, without thinking.

"That was a long time ago," he said. "Dock work's real slow these days."

"Well, guess I'd better be going," I said again. I handed him my card. "Let me know if I can do anything. Anything at all. Okay?"

Tears were forming in his eyes again. "You've already done more than most folks would. You're a really kind man," he said as he closed the door.

I've been called a lot of things in my life. Most of them were said in anger. I smiled to myself as I walked to the car, but it was not a comfortable smile.

That next Sunday's *Times-Picayune* carried a story on the features page about a little girl whose life had just been saved by a much-needed liver transplant. Her family had been waiting for a year. They just didn't have that kind of money, and time

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had almost run out. After seeing the girl's name, I picked up some flowers and headed for the hospital.

The rain was coming down monsoon-style, just like in the tropics. I had to park almost a quarter-mile away and wade the flooded streets, but when I got there, Lisette's smile made it worth the effort. When I left her room, Philippe walked with me out into the hospital corridor and stopped next to the door.

I was still choked up with a happiness for Lisette that really didn't seem like mine to share. I felt awkward, and I tried to think of something else to say to Philippe.

"Guess now, with the operation over," I said, "and your daughter coming home soon, you'll have some time to go down to Breaux Bridge. When I was there, I left some flowers in a bottle. They may not have lasted—with the rain and all."

"Already been there," said Philippe. "Next day. Papa would have expected it, you know."

I puzzled for only a few seconds over what I'd just heard. I felt like I needed to say something, but I wasn't sure what. So I said, "Yeah. That's probably true."

I saw Philippe's tiny eyes dart down the corridor to either side. Then I thought I saw him give me a thin, wry smile.

I read somewhere awhile back that the brain has two halves that each do different things, and I can't remember exactly which side is which, but I know, after leaving the hospital that day, that the two sides of *my* brain were having one hell of an argument with each other.

One was saying, *LeCroix, just let this thing go,* and the other kept answering, *Not until I know for sure.* The next day I drove back to Breaux Bridge.

It was broad daylight, but I told myself that if I did this, it couldn't be like before. It just wouldn't be right to do it in the dark. As I drove the oyster-shell road next to Bayou Teche, I could see the big oak in the distance, and beneath it, the white flagstone, reflecting the late-morning sun like a pale talisman worn by the oak—almost a holy thing. I pulled up in front of the oak and parked next to the flagstone, in a spot that afforded some privacy for what I was about to do.

The first thing I noticed was the longneck Budweiser bottle lying on its side in the weeds and the shriveled hibiscus branch lying next to it. *Kids could've done that,* one side of my brain

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said, and the other side answered, *Just lift up that stone.*

I grabbed my shovel and got out of the pickup. I levered the flagstone, just like before, and slid it aside. The earth looked much the same as I'd left it. *Bet you expected a hole,* one side said, and the other side, being the upstart that I probably am, answered, *Go ahead and dig. You've gotta know.*

So I did—but gently, of course. When I heard the shovel make a scraping sound, I got down on my knees and scooped the earth away until I could see it. But *it* was not the top of the gray urn, but rather something the color of brass. I kept on digging with my hands until I could grab whatever it was and pull.

It was a small Mason jar, only a fraction the size of the urn. It had a brass-colored lid, and through the glass I could see a gray, gritty powder. I unscrewed the lid. Inside were what looked like human ashes and bits of bone. I didn't touch what I saw inside. I replaced the lid, slid the jar back down into the hole, filled the hole again, and slid the flagstone back into place.

Then I just stood there, still stunned, I guess, my mind trying to pick apart the tangled implications. In a few minutes, I picked up the Bud bottle, filled it with bayou water again, and found another sprig of hibiscus.

"That'll have to do for now, Papa Henri," I said.

On the way back to the city, my brain was talking again. One side said, *That's the way it happens. You get sentimental, and you get conned,* and the other side, after being silent for most of the trip, answered, *Maybe. Maybe not. But so what.*

Even today, I still think about those arid, sun-baked islands off the coast of French Guiana. The Salvation Islands, Remy had called them. And I still wonder sometimes if everything or anything that Remy told me was really true.

I wonder whether Papa Henri François really had been locked up for all those ten terrible years on that hell-on-earth penal colony. I wonder whether he really had lived his happiest days in Breaux Bridge. And sometimes I wonder whether he really died, a Godforsaken exile, in French Guiana.

In my line of work, you can get fooled a lot. And I can tell you for sure that I've been fooled a helluva lot more than once, and for a helluva lot less honorable reasons.

Salvation. Yeah, you know, I always liked the name of those islands. ●

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THE GREAT MAN

by Adele Glimm

Promptly at eleven, the big brass knocker on the front door sounded for the first time that day. "Oh, go to the Tower of London, why don't you!" the caretaker shouted from the basement kitchen. But she scraped back her chair and reached for the gnarled walking stick. "Tourists, they can't give old Mags an extra minute, swallow my tea, oh no, no time for that."

Clinging to the frayed rope banister, she dragged herself up the worn stone steps from the kitchen and reached the front door just as the couple on the doorstep was summoning the courage to knock again: She could tell from the way the young man quickly hid one hand in his trousers pocket.

"We wanted to see the house?" the young lady said with that peculiar way the younger Americans had these days of speaking question marks at the ends of sentences that asked nothing.

"I didn't suppose you'd come to take me for a spin," the caretaker said, allowing the door to open just enough to admit them. They were thin people but too short. "Umbrella in there if you please." She pointed to the Chinese umbrella stand which held only one tall black frayed umbrella. "That'll be two pounds fifty. Each. Two more if you want the official guide to the house."

"*She* doesn't need a guide, she's been reading about him and this house all summer," the man said, handing over a five-pound note.

A frequent traveler, Adele Glimm got the idea for the following story while on a visit to Thomas Carlyle's house in London. When she is at home, she works as a public relations writer and teaches a fiction workshop at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Ms. Glimm's previous published work has appeared in *McCall's* and *Redbook*. Her new story for us is a creepy Halloween treat. †

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"Just the same, I'd like a guide, Chuck," the girl flung over her shoulder as she moved down the hall, poking her nose into one old photograph after another.

Back to the pocket for two one-pound coins.

"Oh? Saw the films, did you?" the caretaker said.

"Well, sure we did, a couple of times, but my wife's an English teacher. She teaches his work. She's been wanting to come here for years."

"Just start looking about then," the caretaker said. "I'll hobble after and say my piece but I'm slow these days." She gestured with the walking stick at her bandaged ankle, barely missing a Staffordshire vase on a low table near the sitting-room door. The wife was already circling that room in a kind of trance.

"A bad sprain?" the husband asked. "I'm a doctor. I just got my M.D. but I'm still training. It takes a long time."

"Tripped over the dog," the caretaker said. "Smells his food and he's under my feet in a second."

The wife looked up from her study of the photographs on the sitting-room wall. "Didn't you hate it that the dog in the first movie wasn't anything like *his* dog." She pointed to a portrait of the writer with his dog at his knee. Why didn't her voice go up at the end when she asked a real question?

"It's not every dog is an acting dog," the caretaker said, shrugging. "And dogs of the breed of Pharaoh are not the fashion now, you never see them."

She took a deep breath then and began to talk in a different voice, a memorized voice. "He lived in this house from eighteen twenty-one until his death nearly forty years later. He wrote most of his books in the third-floor study where his pen and his pipe still lie on the desk where he left them when his last illness overtook him." She paused to breathe. "He was married to his wife, Margaret Scarrow, right in this sitting room because his philosophy disallowed him setting foot in a church. If you pass through that archway you can see the dining room where he entertained other great men of his day, Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle among them."

"Did his wife eat dinner with them?" the young wife interrupted, caressing the plush backs of the dining-room chairs.

"Please do not touch the exhibits," the caretaker said. "She didn't, no, the conversation bored her."

"What an idiot! I wish I'd been there."

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"At the top of the first staircase you'll find the bedrooms," the caretaker said coldly. "You'll get there before me but remember not to touch anything. The human hand is an instrument of destruction."

She was out of breath when she finally joined them in a back room with a white-canopied bed, a dressing table, and a flowered china washstand and pitcher. A black lace shawl was spread over the high back of a wing chair.

"You can see plain, this was his wife's bedroom. His only child, a son, was born in this room and died in the nursery next door, less than six months later. The cradle is visible through the doorway."

"What did he die of?" the doctor asked. She could tell it was the first thing since her bad ankle that had caught his interest.

"In those days children died. A cough and a fever and the lungs filled up and it was over. They didn't have the tests and the drugs and the National Health." She stared them down. It wasn't, after all, her fault..

In the big front bedroom across the hall, the wife stood with bowed head at the foot of the wide mahogany four-poster. "If you're thinking he died in this bed, you'd be right," the caretaker said. "When he was dying they laid down straw in the street outside to quiet the noise of the traffic. You wouldn't think horses and carriages could make a great noise, but they did."

The ceiling of the study at the top of the house was fitted with a huge skylight, like an artist's studio. It had begun to rain and the noise of the rain on the glass punctuated her words, which seemed to come faster and faster as the rain beat down harder. "There's the pen and the pipe and a supply of the nibs his wife kept sharpened for him. The bookcases contain reference works and books his friends wrote, but none of his own. He always said the failures he'd allowed to get into print would prevent him from writing another word if he let them into the room."

"Failures!" cried the young wife, twisting the strap of her leather handbag. "What a tragedy! Didn't he realize what a genius he was?"

"They say none was ever harder on him than he was himself," the caretaker answered.

Downstairs again, and the husband said could they skip the kitchen or they'd miss their lunch reservation at The Cheshire Cheese.

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"Fine with me, I'm sure he didn't waste his time in the kitchen," his wife said. "But isn't Pharaoh's grave in the garden?"

"Yes, surely, but the rain is raining on it," the caretaker said.

"As if I'd care about that!"

Through the glass of the back garden door, they watched her kneel to read the small granite headstone. "She's a real fanatic," the husband said, sighing.

"They mostly are, who bother to come here."

When they had gone, she could look forward to a rest. The house was closed for two hours at lunchtime. She clumped down to the kitchen and put a frozen dinner in the microwave which hid behind the pantry door with all the other machines they hadn't yet invented in his day. She sank into a rocking chair, stretching her bad leg out to rest on a stool.

"Did you see that then?" she said. Her voice was old Mags's voice once more. "How nice he was to her? He didn't want to be here, he'd have preferred to tour St. Giles Hospital or a nice clinic somewhere. But he came along with her, nice as pie. When did you ever take me anywhere I wanted to go? I'd have liked to go out of a night to the music hall but no, that was too common for you."

The microwave chimed and she removed the plastic plate and settled herself at the ancient scrubbed-pine table. "What's that you say?" Her mouth was full now. "You say she works to pay for his doctor studies? Well, didn't I slave to cook and serve for all that ragtag bunch you said would help you get published and get the good reviews and such rubbish? And then when they gave you a bad review you beat me; it was a good thing the clothes that was then was all covered up, I don't know how wives manage now with the bare things they have to wear."

She was silent for a time, chewing on a chicken leg. When she had stripped it of flesh, she tossed it across the kitchen floor. "Here you are then, Pharaoh, you four-footed creature from the other side, and don't you go chew it on that hall carpet neither."

She made a cup of tea and drank it, nearly nodding off, then tidied up the remains of lunch and ascended slowly two flights to the bedroom floor.

In his wife's bedroom, she sat on the bed to remove her shoes, then stretched out carefully in the very middle of the white

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bedcover, talking all the time. "Oh, what a relief it was when I insisted on a room of my own. They all think you were so high-minded but I know the dirt you liked to get up to."

Silence, her eyes closing for a few minutes, then opening wide as she sat up, startled. "Oh, I thought I heard the baby crying! That's the worst, when that happens. Is it you then, what's wrong, are you needing a cuddle?" She rolled toward one side of the bed. "You're like a baby yourself, you hate sleeping alone in that big bed. You can get in and cuddle with Mags for a bit. You know I never mean half I say." When she finally slept, she snored.

It seemed that the rain would keep all visitors away that afternoon. It was nearly four before the knocker fell. The caretaker, who had awakened feeling lonely, was hovering in the front hall and immediately snatched the door open.

The tall thin man on the step wore khaki trousers and a dark polo-neck sweater. His hair was the color of wet sand. He carried a briefcase and was shivering in the damp air.

He was the type of man who apologizes. He began to apologize for knocking too loudly, for dripping rain on her floor, for wanting to see over the house. "You see, I'm writing a paper about his work and I thought for the atmosphere . . ."

He sounded American, but of course if you've been away from a place for a long time, change is to be expected.

"We'll go through the house bottom to top, if you don't mind," the caretaker told him, excitement coursing through her body like a river pouring over a flood plain.

He ran his hand over the stone countertop in the kitchen. "Picturesque, I guess, but pretty inconvenient to cook in." Though he spoke politely, his eyes kept straying to the ceiling and she knew he was eager to climb higher, which was natural.

"I see you've noticed the beams, they're very old, they used to hang hams from them to keep them from the rats." What was wrong with her voice, she couldn't keep it from shaking. "One of these days I'll be trotting down to the butcher's for a nice piece of mutton for a meat pie. Nothing like a good open coal fire for lending flavor to the meat."

"Could I see his study?" the man said, not quite interrupting her but getting in fast at the end of her sentence.

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"All in good time. There's the drawing-room floor, isn't there, and the bedrooms." But she began to lead him upward, talking all the time. "Tell me, do you smoke?"

"Not here, I wouldn't dream—"

"Oh, it's not forbidden. This house is used to the smell of smoke, it's soaked into the pores. Many's the night I smell pipe smoke even now."

They stood in his bedroom. "Are you chilly? You're shivering. There's a jacket I could lend you hanging right in that wardrobe near your right side. A good thick maroon wool it is, old but solid still. I keep everything mended and safe from the moths."

He looked at her oddly. "Thank you, I'm not at all cold."

"Well, I just wondered. You're about of a size. And the color your hair's gotten to be, red hair always fades young to that color, doesn't it." They were at the top of the house, in the study by now.

The man squinted at the titles of the books behind their glass doors and she talked on. She said, "This head of mine is gray as a floor mop now but it was pale gold then and a yard long when he drew out the pins at night. He liked to do it himself but—"

"I beg your pardon," the visitor interrupted in a new tone now, a firmer tone, as if attaining the study at last had made him more sure of himself. "I'm sure what you're saying is fascinating to some, but it's his work I'm concerned with. Would you mind giving me a little quiet so I can hear myself think?"

"Work! Work, is it?" She moved quickly closer to him and he backed away until he was up against the writing table. "There's other things more important than work though you never had enough human feelings to know it. You just stay here and work if you've a mind to! You'll have more quiet than you can do with before I'm through with you!"

He sprinted past her towards the door, but he tripped on the marble hearthstone and fell, sprawling across the faded kilim as she ran out, slamming the door and locking it with the great rusted iron key.

Shaking, she limped downstairs to the ground-floor sitting room and sank into the armchair in the bow window. She could see out to the street where occasional tourists, sheltering their cameras and maps beneath umbrellas, pottered by, but no one knocked.

There was no sound from the top of the house. She remem-

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bered the day he had convinced her to lock him in, to force him to finish some work that was overdue at the publishers, and though she had done as he asked, she returned in less than an hour. "What do you want, I was working well," he'd protested, but she'd said, "I can't leave you here, what if there was a fire and I lost my head and ran out, you'd be burned to a cinder, I can't leave you."

He had laughed and told her: "It's you that starts my fires," and pulled her onto his knee, and then he made love to her on the kilim in front of the fireplace, but later he'd shouted that she'd made him lose his way with his work, she'd done it on purpose to ruin him.

When she heard the noises, she started up, for one second thinking it was the door knocker clattering at last, but then she heard it for what it was: heavy footsteps descending from the top of the house. So she'd had no need to worry that other time, he could get out when he wanted.

She forced herself to sit still in her chair, not breathing, until he stood in the sitting-room doorway. He wore the maroon wool jacket and the dead pipe was clenched in one fist. He said: "Is it too much to expect to find fresh tobacco in the house?" The American in his voice was fading away with every word, she could hear it going.

"You could buy it yourself, I'm not your slave." But having said her piece, she added, "I'll fetch it when I go to buy the dinner."

"I suppose you'll need money again, then?" He reached under the jacket to his trousers pocket.

"I won't, no," Mags said, pointing her chin at him. "I don't depend on you or any man, not anymore I don't. I have a proper job. The Trust pays me good wages to look after this house and show it to people."

He laughed, coming into the room and throwing himself down on the sofa, his muddy shoes swung up on the blue brocade as if he owned it. "Who'd want to see over the house if it weren't for me? And you think you're not still dependent on a man!"

Tears unshed for over a century blinded her. "It's the old argument we're having, isn't it? How important your work is and where is the money coming from? I tell you, it isn't your dusty books that brings in the pounds now, it's those films they made. It's the gorgeous actors, though that one that plays the woman you made me into isn't half the beauty I was. And they pay to see the photography, it's so lovely you could die, lovelier than life or anything you ever wrote in a dry old book."

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"It's none of that," he argued. "It's the sex they put in the films that rakes it in. In our day, I'd have seen the inside of a prison if I'd tried to write what they do to each other on the screen."

"You could have made money one way or another, other men did. Where was the money when our baby was dying? We couldn't pay for the doctor and you wouldn't take charity. When I said he was sick, you told me he coughs for attention, but you were the one wanted all the attention."

He sprang off the sofa and stood over her, shaking his fist in her face. "You witch! You spent the money for the doctor on that hellish black shawl! I should have tossed it in the fire the day it came into this house, turned it to ashes like that manuscript you claimed you burnt up by mistake. Mistake!" From the red, raving look of him, she thought his heart must explode. "And do you think I don't know Pharaoh died because you poisoned him?"

"I never—"

"You knew that meat was rotting, you were too mean to throw it away and get him something sound to eat."

She said, "The dog was yours to care for. I had enough work without that—never a servant girl and what if we'd had one? You'd never have kept your hands off her!"

The end of her sentence competed with the sound of the knocker falling loudly, twice. "It's ten past the hour," she complained. "I don't do tours past five o'clock."

"Let them in," he ordered. "Go and do your job, for God's sake, since you're so proud of being a wage earner."

"Oh, what's the use arguing."

The young girl she let into the hall wore old jeans and a red cable jumper. Pale hair hung long and loose down her back. She was a beauty.

"I have the guidebook already," she said in response to Mags's question, producing it from the brown leather bag that hung from her shoulder. "You sold it to me last time I came here."

"I thought you looked a bit familiar," Mags said.

"I've rented the videos since then and watched them over and over," the girl said, smiling at her own foolishness. "I thought, now the house will mean even more to me."

"Then I won't trouble you and myself with speeches. Just walk where you will."

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The girl smiled politely at the man standing at the end of the sitting room beneath the writer's portrait, but she did not linger there. She wandered through the dining room and into the back parlor, moving with the grace of a dancer.

"What do you think?" Mags asked in a low voice. "She's much like that music hall hussy that came between us, isn't she?"

He said, "I don't know whom you're referring to."

"Never mind that talk. We'd had all we wanted of each other by then. I never blamed you half as much as I let on." She sank into the armchair and spoke, looking not at him but straight out the bow window, as if addressing the wind and the rain. "I was glad enough for my body to be free of yours. Body, ha! It wasn't long before it *was* a body and no pleasure to anyone, lying waiting for you in the churchyard, for they put us together again in death. Think of me, lying among all those great men in that honored place! More men than ever I lay with in life, in spite of the way you accused me." Together they listened to the girl's gentle footsteps, running up stairs and along hallways and down again. Mags continued: "Where does *she* lie? I never knew."

"She died young," the man said. "Her parents took her. That's all I knew."

"I haven't as many things to pack up as last time," Mags mused. "I'll be out of your way by tonight."

The girl looked shyly in at them through the hall door. Mags struggled out of her chair. "Won't you have a cup of tea before you go?"

"Me?" Confusion crossed the perfect features. "Tea here? The guidebook doesn't say you do teas."

Mags laughed. "No, we don't as a usual thing. It's just—I didn't hear you go down to the kitchen, did I? So I thought, while you're seeing over the ground floor, I'll be happy to pour you a cup."

"Well, it's kind of you."

"No bother at all. Just this way. Come along."

She led the way down the stone staircase, stepping more surely than she had all day. At the bottom, at the end of the dark hall, she said: "I don't think the storeroom was open to visitors last time you came."

She held open the heavy oak door. As the girl passed in front of her, Mags looked her up and down, anger and jealousy and fear mixing lightly with pity. ●

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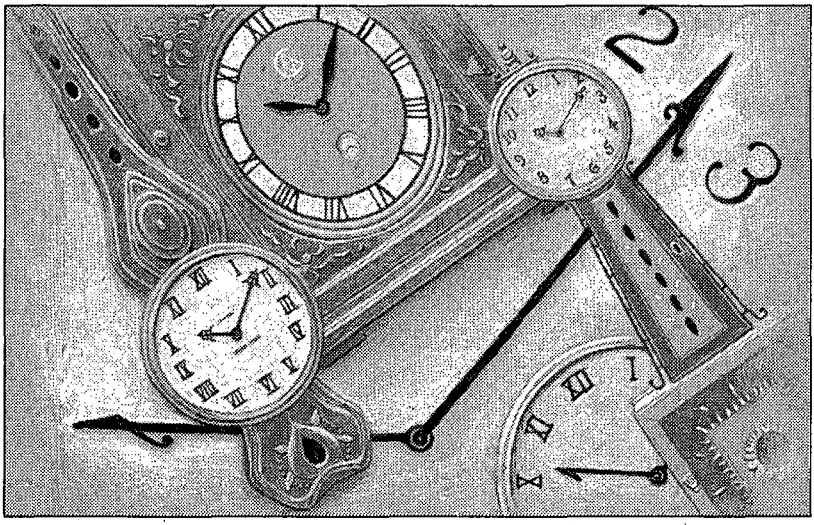

Art by Alan M. Clark

THE RASPUTIN FABERGÉ

by James Powell

As Officers Arugula and Raditch led the murderer away in handcuffs, Inspector Crenshaw Malone of the Gardenville Police stood in the driveway of the Sydney Greenbean residence, pondering the gruesome discovery in the refrigerator crisper. Yes, a wig and a change of wardrobe were all the murderer needed to assume his mother's identity. (The Greenbeans were famous look-alikes. Almost like peas in a pod, people said.) When anyone asked about her missing son Stringfellow, Greenbean imitated his mother's fragile contralto and told them he'd gone to Casablanca to take the waters.

But Peter Parsnip, the prying next-door neighbor, was skeptical and took his suspicions to the police. "There are no waters in Casablanca," he told Crenshaw Malone.

"So he was misinformed," the bored inspector replied.

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"Listen," Parsnip persisted. "The same day she said Stringfellow left for Morocco I saw him at Hardware City buying a Phleggomatic Chopper II."

Now Malone watched the coroner's van pull into the driveway and shook his head. Yes indeed, it had been one sad day for Gardenville when Lyndon Phlegg invented the food processor that bore his name which, like the infamous Rat-a-tat-touille Gun before it, was too powerful a weapon of mass vegetable destruction to be put into the hands of a psychopathic young legume bent on destroying his own mother, who stood between him and his inheritance.

The sleuthing duo of Polly and Wallis MacDougal have been solving mysteries in *EQMM* since 1982, but their creator, James Powell, seems never to run out of zany ideas for their off-beat cases. Mr. Powell is one of the short story's best and most prolific humorists, and one of a very few writers able to add to the humorous short story a dash of mystery. †

When she'd proofread the final page of her latest mystery story for children, Polly MacDougal slipped the manuscript into the manila envelope addressed to *Hardboiled Humpty* magazine. Then she hoisted her large frame from the desk chair and went out to the kitchen in search of the old silver cigarette case where they kept their stamps. But she left the computer on. Another deadline was approaching fast. She had promised a short story about her private investigatrix M. M. Q. Contreras for the upcoming anthology by the Hawkshaw Sisterhood, the association of women writers of children's mysteries.

Through the kitchen window she saw her husband Wallis at the picnic table under the Norway maple. Since his retirement from Simon Cameron University, he often spent a part of Sunday afternoon down there doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. But today he wasn't alone. Their old friend Owen Pellat was with him. Polly was surprised. She'd have thought the curator of the Hardy Dawes Memorial Museum of the Early American Clock would have his hands full with the details of the museum's formal opening tonight.

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Pellat had the perfect build for his over-dramatic nature. He was tall and thin, with long arms made for flying about in abundant gesture. Now Pellat flourished a sheet of paper in one hand and slapped it with the other. Now he raised his arms imploringly to heaven, paced a short distance, turned, marched back, and sat down at the picnic table. Now he was on his feet again, pretending to pull handfuls of hair from his bald head. Then, with a sudden farewell wave to Wallis, Pellat strode away, disappearing around the corner of the house.

When Polly reached the picnic table her husband was staring off into the darkest shadows beneath the tree with his arms folded, deep in thought. Judging her husband to be in one of his cryptic moods, she sat down without asking about the bee in Pellat's bonnet. Instead she picked up the crossword at his elbow. This week's puzzle topic was "Gods and Goddesses?" Polly knew the question mark meant some kind of joke or fanciful play on words. At lunch he had been working on the clue "English goddess of incredulity?" She found the seven spaces of the answer filled in. " 'Shirley'?" She frowned and then asked, " 'Shirley' is the English goddess of incredulity?"

Wallis nodded. "Now I'm working on 'Egyptian god of seepage.' Blank, blank, M, blank, S, blank, blank."

Polly mouthed his words silently and shook her head. "Hell, I don't even get the other one."

Wallis turned to look at her. " 'Shirley,' as in 'Shirley you jest,' " he explained. "As in 'Shirley we can't just stand by and watch poor Pellat lose his curator's job.' "

Polly and Owen Pellat went way back. They'd gone to school together. Polly had taken Wallis to Pellat's shop to buy their wedding rings, although by that time the jewelry and watch repair shop he inherited from his father was only a sideline to his main interest, Early American clocks. Over the years Pellat had guided Hardy Dawes, a local land developer, as the man put together one of the finest collections of clocks on the East Coast. In the process Pellat had neglected his business, gone bankrupt, and been forced to move in with his widowed sister Millicent, a domineering woman who rejoiced in having her older brother under her thumb. Three years later, when Hardy Dawes died, he left a good part of his fortune to set up the clock museum as a repository for his collection and, some said, to provide an independent living for his friend and advisor Owen Pellat. In

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recent months, as Pellat labored toward the opening of the museum, he'd become a regular visitor at the MacDougals'. They seldom dealt in clocks in their small antiques business, and perhaps Pellat found their company a relief from the Byzantine politics and rivalries of the clock world.

"What's going on?" asked Polly.

"Pellat's been letting his mail pile up," explained Wallis. "He came by to show me this letter he just found. New York City postmark. Woven paper with an odd blue fleck in it. The typed message read, 'Opening night they'll steal the Rasputin Fabergé.' "

The year before he died, and over Pellat's objections, Hardy Dawes paid twenty-five thousand dollars for a clock called the Rasputin Fabergé just for the pleasure of owning something that might have come from the famed Fabergé workshop. The clock stood eight inches tall, its egg-shaped silver case decorated with seed pearls and semiprecious stones of blue and yellow. The clock face was a portrait of Alexandra's beloved holy man. Some said the Emperor Nicholas ordered it made as an Easter gift to his empress. Most experts considered the clock a forgery.

"Wait a minute," said Polly. "Didn't Pellat say the damn thing wasn't Early and it wasn't American so he wasn't even going to display it in a museum of Early American clocks?"

"That was before he got this brainstorm to show it just this once, a kind of farewell appearance before he sold it. Norman Syme's coming down to cover the opening for *Timepiece* magazine. Pellat hoped the publicity would pump up the price."

"So what's the problem?" asked Polly. "I thought everything is either bolted down or too heavy to walk off with."

"That's the permanent collection," said Wallis. "But with the Rasputin Fabergé, Pellat thought he could get away with just putting it out there. I mean, after all, the guests are by invitation only. Then . . . "

"Then suddenly this letter puts his job on the line," said Polly. "Boy, Angelica Herbert would sure scream bloody murder." Hardy Dawes's daughter, who was on the museum board, had fought hard and unsuccessfully to get her father's will broken. She blamed Pellat for her father's interest in clocks, which had cost her so much of her inheritance.

"Anyway," added Wallis, "Pellat borrowed Officer Darnley from the borough to stand guard. And I'm supposed to be on

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hand just in case. You know, to point the finger of guilt if the clock does get stolen." He spread his hands helplessly.

"Indeed, O Great Solver of Crimes," said Polly, for he had gotten a lot of swagger out of his detecting reputation.

"Crimes of a local sort, yes," insisted Wallis. "Things in the small potatoes line. Not something with Pellat's future riding on it."

Polly stood up and went back to the house to work on her M. M. Q. Contreras story. She was concerned for her old friend. But Wallis didn't like her mixing in his cases except in the fetch-and-carry line.

That evening each MacDougal brought a thoughtful load of silence to the dinner table and carried it with them afterwards on their walk to the museum opening. The June night was warm and the fireflies active. They went by way of the post office so that Polly could drop her short story in the mail.

"That the one about Hubbard Squash and the murderous green bean?" asked Wallis as the envelope dropped from sight. Polly nodded and did not correct him on the inspector's name. Crenshaw Malone wasn't his favorite among her detective heroes.

The Old Meeting House, among the first brick buildings in White Swan, had been erected by the townspeople for religious services until the various denominations could build their own churches. The last arrivals occupied the building until recently, when shrinking numbers necessitated their being absorbed by a similar denomination in a town nearby. Several other empty buildings were considered to be the home of the Dawes Museum of the Early American Clock—White Swan was something of a graveyard of commerce—but the Old Meeting House was chosen, mainly for its off-street parking in the rear.

The MacDougals entered through the front gate in the high iron fence. Chinese lanterns decorated the box elder on the lawn. A few men in blue blazers and women with blue hair stood about on the churchyard grass with their glasses of wine, talking and enjoying the evening. If they looked a bit uneasy it was not so much because they were standing on the dead. No grave had been dug there for over a hundred years and plot and grass had long ago become one. But in the dark it was still possible to stub a toe or twist an ankle on the tops of the modest tombstones

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buried so deep in the earth that they resembled gray, slightly raised eyebrows. Through the bright doorway came the sound of the Simon Cameron String Quartet from the university's music faculty.

The church-museum interior was plain, painted wood, the windows clear glass edged in blue. Polly had always admired the building's clean, simple, open shape. Now the pews had been replaced by a ticking congregation of machines to tell the time, shelves of shelf clocks, walls filled with looking-glass clocks and wag-on-the-walls. Case clocks of every size and wood stood like varnished sentry boxes guarding the hour.

"Pellat's got a full house," said Wallis, leading Polly over to the table where the local winery was giving out samples of its wares.

Polly had to agree. There was His Honor the mayor. And the president of the bank. And the director and upper-level people of Shlage Laboratories on the outskirts of town. And anyone else locally who wanted to be thought of as anyone. "But where's Pellat hiding himself? And who are those two?" Polly nodded at the big man in the ill-fitting dark suit and the small, bright-eyed woman with gray hair puzzling over an old office clock in bird's-eye maple, a popular wood with businessmen whose clock-watching clerks found themselves being stared back at.

"I'll bet that's Serge Ospenski, the Russian art expert and appraiser," said Wallis as they armed themselves with wine. "Pellat didn't expect him until next week some time. But this morning Ospenski called and invited himself and his wife to the opening. Pellat was on his way to the station to pick them up when he dropped by to give me the guest list.

"Speaking of which," he continued, "after I'd studied it and excluded the local worthies, I combined logic, surmise, and a good slug of Pellat's clock gossip to come up with a suspect list. One might be the thief. Or two. After all, the warning letter said 'they.' You know, one to hit the lights while the other pockets the Rasputin. So let's make the rounds. Our first suspect's right over there. Mrs. Angelica Herbert."

Hardy Dawes's daughter was scowling at the Rasputin Fabergé, which stood by itself on a fluted column of wood in the middle of the room. Officer Darnley of White Swan's finest was on guard in full uniform beside it, looking like vigilance with a strong tincture of shyness.

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"Mrs. Herbert?" said Polly incredulously. "You mean she'd steal it just to get back at Pellat?"

Wallis shrugged. "Or maybe she needs the money. I hear her son Sterling is costing her a bundle bailing him out of the scrapes he gets himself into."

Angelica Herbert was a trim, well-dressed blonde with a Florida tan and an impatient way of smoking cigarettes. As they approached she tried to look interested. "And you are . . . " she began as if their name was on the tip of her tongue like a shred of tobacco.

"The MacDougals," said Wallis. "We met at your father's funeral."

"Ah yes," she said. "The professor and the writer. Mr. Pellat's friends."

"I hope you like the way things have turned out," said Polly.

"What choice have I got?" asked Mrs. Herbert. She took in the museum with a toss of her head. "If this's what Father wanted, well, he's got it. As far as I'm concerned, it's all so much junk."

She nodded at the Rasputin Fabergé. "And creepy junk at that."

Polly couldn't argue with that. The eyes of the portrait seemed to follow you when you moved. Men sure know what to give a girl for Easter.

"When's this show going to get on the road?" demanded Mrs. Herbert. "I thought they said eight sharp. Anybody got the time? I don't wear a watch."

"Coals to Newcastle, right?" laughed Wallis. "Mr. Rasputin's face says a quarter to."

But Mrs. Herbert's interest had moved elsewhere. She was craning her neck around the room. "Anybody seen my boy Sterling?" She looked around again. "Oh, there he is talking to one of the catering people. I wish he'd spend half the time looking for a job that he spends chasing the girls." Mrs. Herbert strode off toward the food table, shooing her son away with her hands.

"If Mrs. Herbert and her son are suspects one and two, there's number three," said Wallis, nodding across the room to where Leon Briskin stood, watching the guests with the satisfied air of a fox watching over a particularly plump flock of chickens.

"But why would Briskin steal the clock?" asked Polly. "He sold it to Dawes in the first place."

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"Because he's a crook," said Wallis. "And because the word's starting to get around. Maybe Briskin wants to steal it before the appraiser brands it a fake. If so, he's in for a surprise."

Leon Briskin turned toward them as they approached. He had a round face in the middle of which he wore a screwed-up smile like a monocle. "MacDougal?" he asked, when Polly and Wallis introduced themselves. "Oh yes, the nice people Porter took to the cleaners."

Polly saw her husband blush. They'd recently sold Denton Porter an eighteenth century clock with a japanned case for much less than it was worth because a Pennsylvania Dutch clothes cupboard they had long coveted had come on the market. Porter's boast about the killing he made became the talk of the MacDougals' corner of the antiques business.

Bridling, Wallis said, "Not to change the subject, but I hear your Rasputin Fabergé has something of a hazy past."

Briskin shrugged. "When I heard Pellat meant to sell I offered him ten thousand more than Dawes paid me for it. That's how hazy I think its past is. But he wanted it appraised first. So in a few days everyone will see that Briskin only deals in top-grade, A-number-1 stuff." Here Briskin started to go.

"Oh, you won't have to wait that long," said Wallis with obvious satisfaction. "The appraiser's here tonight."

Polly saw the smile drop from Briskin's face like a monocle from an astonished Prussian eye. Then she and her husband moved on to Denton Porter, the next suspect.

"I hope the hell it is Porter," said Wallis. "God, I'd love to point the finger of guilt in his smirking face. But why would he do it? The best I can come up with is that story of how Mrs. Herbert got him to give testimony about Pellat's competency as a curator by promising him the lucrative job of selling her father's clock collection if the will was overturned. Maybe Porter feels she still owes him something."

"Like what?"

"Like the curatorship, if he gets rid of Pellat."

They found Denton Porter in one of the darker corners, from which his ghostly pale face peered somewhat, Polly thought, like a worn knee in a denim trouser leg.

"Ah, the MacDougals," he said.

"Ah, Porter," said Wallis, "I'm surprised Pellat invited you after the things you said about him in court."

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"I'm glad he didn't take it personally," said Porter. "Pellat loves clocks and knows a great deal about them. But he's no museum curator. As disorganized as he is, frankly I'm surprised he got this place open at all." He paused and looked around the church. "Such as it is."

"Well," said Wallis, "maybe one of these days the museum will need a new curator and you'll get a chance to put your own ideas into practice."

"Fat chance," laughted Porter. But his attention had wandered. Polly saw that he was looking across the room to where Briskin was holding forth to a very bored Sterling Herbert on some fine point of a miniature case clock.

"No," insisted Porter, "I'm a dealer. I buy and sell clocks. I hear Pellat's selling his fake Rasputin Fabergé."

"The appraiser's here tonight," said Wallis.

"Is he now?" replied Porter in a pleased voice. He smiled over at Briskin. "Well well well." Turning back to Wallis he said, "Fake or not, people snap that kind of stuff up. It should give Pellat's acquisition budget a good shot in the arm." He pulled two sheets of folded paper from his pocket and offered them to Wallis. "I'm glad I thought to bring along a description of some choice items in my current inventory."

Wallis handed the papers back. "I'm hardly an expert on clocks," he said, adding, "as you well know."

Here there was a small disturbance in the crowd, which parted to reveal a harried-looking Pellat carrying a shotgun. "Here, Roy. Take this," said the museum curator, handing Officer Darnley the weapon. "Like I said, I'd feel better if you had more firepower."

Wallis led Polly out of earshot and said, "Try this on for size. Suppose Angelica Herbert wants Pellat out of the picture so she can name her son curator."

"But he doesn't know anything about clocks."

"Or anything else," said Wallis. "But he is Hardy Dawes's grandson. With Mrs. Herbert pushing for him that should have some weight with the other board members."

"Nice," said Polly, nodding in admiration. "She unloads the son who's a major drain on her finances by getting him a job as curator of the museum that cost her a healthy chunk of her inheritance."

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Just then a loud flourish of strings from the quartet signaled the start of the formal ceremony to open the Hardy Dawes Memorial Museum of the Early American Clock. As guests drifted in from the lawn, Owen Pellat welcomed everyone to the occasion, adding, "But before we begin I've some exciting news. A few minutes ago Mr. Ospenski, the celebrated appraiser of things Russian, pronounced our so-called Rasputin Fabergé genuine and with a value of close to a million dollars."

As his guests murmured with pleasure and surprise, Pellat continued, "And I can assure the friends of the museum that from the sale of our new-found treasure we will be able to purchase timepieces to make our collection the finest in the world." Then with a look at his watch he said, "And now the clocks of our collection would like to welcome you to their new home themselves." Pellat waited with a nervous smile.

The silence deepened. Suddenly, with a great clamor of clicking and whirring, one clock willfully struck the hour ahead of the rest. Then the first of several versions of Big Ben chimed in. Now the church was vibrating with bongs, clunks, bings, and, here and there, the call of the mechanical cuckoo. The Rasputin egg announced the hour with a ring no louder than a bicycle bell. Turning to her husband to remark on this, Polly saw his expression brighten with discovery.

The din subsided and then, after one or two more bongs for good measure, ceased completely. The string quartet struck up a two-step and the guests crowded in around the million-dollar clock for a closer look or returned to wine and conversation.

Polly asked, "You're on to something."

"Osmosis," smiled Wallis. Then he explained, "The Egyptian God of seepage. O-S-M-O-S-I-S." But Polly suspected more lay behind his smile than that.

"Our final suspect's talking to the Ospenskis," said Wallis, nodding at Norman Syme, the editor of *Timepiece* magazine, a thin, balding young man with a nervous eye who affected a journalistic raincoat. "Word is he has a cocaine habit that keeps him strapped for cash."

As the MacDougals approached, their path converged with Leon Briskin's. "Didn't I tell you Briskin only deals in top-notch stuff?" the man insisted from behind a screwed-up smile of swaggering Cyclopean proportions.

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When Briskin and the MacDougals had introduced themselves to the Russian couple, Wallis said, "You've added a real luster to the evening, Mr. Ospenski."

"As for luster," said Ospenski, "Mr. Pellat's photographs were so intriguing I had to rearrange my schedule. And here I am."

Mrs. Ospenski smiled. "Intriguing? Serge, you were positively excited out of your mind."

Briskin said, "I knew it was a Fabergé the moment I set eyes on it."

"Then you've better eyes than mine," said Ospenski. "As I told Mr. Syme here, I always doubted such a clock existed. It isn't in the Imperial inventory. But recently, in the Fabergé atelier records, my wife found references to a prototype with a portrait of the holy man built at the emperor's command."

Mrs. Ospenski nodded. "After Rasputin's assassination the emperor ordered the clock destroyed. But before he could be obeyed, the doom Rasputin predicted befell the emperor and his family and they were murdered, too."

"And the clock—like so many of my country's artistic treasures—vanished into the chaos that followed," added her husband.

"A great story," said Syme. "A clock that sold for twenty-five thousand turns out to be worth a million. Mr. Briskin here's probably kicking himself."

"I made my profit," replied Briskin. "A deal's a deal."

"All I mean is, if you could renegotiate things and share in this windfall, you would."

"Okay," conceded Briskin. "Who wouldn't? But I'm not greedy. The trick's not to get greedy."

During this exchange Wallis caught Polly's eye and fingered his lapel. Polly recognized Ospenski's unusual lapel pin from an emblem collection of European turn-of-the-century reactionary groups that had once passed through their hands. The drawn bow with an arrow pointing backwards was the badge of The Defenders of Yesterday, a secret society pledged to return Europe to pre-World War I days. It looked to Polly like Wallis had two more suspects.

"Hey, this calls for pictures," said Syme. "My camera's out in the car."

As the editor hurried for the door Ospenski said, "I confess I had hoped Mr. Pellat would let us take the clock back to Russia."

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Ospenski shrugged his large shoulders. "Well, as you people say, there is more than one way to skin a rat."

"You mean 'cat,' Serge," laughed his wife.

As Polly and her husband started to go, Wallis turned back, held up his wrist, and said, "My watch has stopped. Anybody got the correct time?"

"It's eight-twenty," said Ospenski.

His wife laughed again. "No, Serge," she said, "it's eight twenty-three."

Wallis waited to reset his watch.

"You're both wrong," said Briskin. "It's exactly eight twenty-one."

Wallis left Polly under the wag-on-the-walls. "There's Jesse Williams," he said, rushing off. "Got to speak to him. I don't know how much time's left."

As Polly watched her husband lead the White Swan high-school wrestling coach outside, she pondered what the hell was going on. After a minute or two Mrs. Ospenski passed by heading for the door and fanning herself with a museum brochure. Yes, the place had become stuffy and guests were drifting outside into the fresh air. A young catering woman passed by followed by Sterling Herbert.

Polly looked around and made a count of the suspects who were still inside. Then Wallis rejoined her and she could demand, "What's going on?"

"Tempus omnia relevat," said Wallis. "Time will reveal all things."

"A quote from another of your dead white European males?"

"Long, long dead," said Wallis. "But remember, even a clock that stopped centuries ago is still right twice a day."

Something exploded outside. Heads turned toward the sound. The string quartet faltered. A moment later the mayor appeared in the doorway. "Roy," he called, "your damn patrol car just went bang and now it's smoking like a chimney."

"Holy hell!" shouted Officer Darnley and sprinted outside followed by a crowd of the curious.

"Come on," said Wallis. "This is it." He led Polly outside. But she stopped him at the top of the steps. "You've got a load of suspects back in there," she said. "Briskin, Mrs. Herbert, Porter, Ospenski."

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"Let me put it this way," said Wallis. "You can't put a person in jail for wanting to steal something."

"For Pellat's sake I hope you know what you're doing."

"For Pellat's sake, so do I," said Wallis.

Polly would've preferred more confidence in his voice.

As they came down the steps, Officer Darnley was dancing excitedly on the edge of the dense cloud of smoke tumbling from the windows of the police car at the curb. The light from the Chinese lanterns painted the scene in hellish colors. Museum guests crowded up to the high iron fence, watching through the bars. The more cautious stood back on the path or in the churchyard. The residents of the nearby houses stood on their porches. In the distance a siren sounded, summoning the members of the White Swan volunteer fire company. More guests were coming out of the museum now, but Polly hadn't seen any of the suspects yet. Suddenly a light flashed within the smoke, followed by a second, louder bang whose echo bounced off walls for blocks around. As the billows of smoke grew less and then abruptly stopped, the last of the museum guests, including Wallis's suspects hurried down the museum steps and mingled with the crowd.

Pellat came rushing by all adither. "If Darnley's over there and you're here," he demanded of Wallis over his shoulder as he took the steps two at a time, "who's watching the clock?"

Pellat was back outside quickly, his face ashen. "It's gone," he said. "The Rasputin Fabergé's been stolen."

Mrs. Herbert appeared from nowhere. "You incompetent fool," she shouted.

Ospenski stepped out of the crowd and opened his jacket. "Considering my words back there about skinning the rat, I insist you search me."

"That goes double for me," said Briskin.

The museum guests had turned away from the police car to watch the scene at the bottom of the steps. Even the Shlage Laboratories people, who prided themselves on being more worldly than the locals, were caught up in the drama of the moment.

"Then search me, too," said Porter. Then he turned to Pellat. "Don't say I didn't try to warn you."

Polly thought she heard a sigh of disappointment from the crowd when Wallis said, "It's too late for searches. Our thief's

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handed off the clock to an accomplice by now. And speak of the devil . . . " There was the sound of footsteps on the gravel path to the parking lot. Jesse Williams came around the corner of the Old Meeting House holding Norman Syme in a half nelson with one hand and the Rasputin Fabergé in the other.

"He came sprinting to his car just like you said he would, Mr. MacDougal," said Williams.

"What kind of frame-up is this?" demanded Syme defiantly. "Some bastard must've slipped that damn clock in my raincoat pocket in all the excitement."

"All the carefully timed excitement," noted Wallis. "That first bang pretty much emptied out the museum. The second gave the thief an instant to steal the clock. Yes, someone had to know just when to activate the timing device with smoke canisters and concussion grenades in Officer Darnley's car.

"But timepieces can be variable things," continued Wallis. "Earlier tonight we had a good demonstration of that. Right now I suspect if I asked everyone here for the exact time you'd all give a different answer. But two watches would have to be synchronized down to the second, the thief's and the accomplice's. Mr. Williams, what does your friend's watch say?"

Shaking Williams's hand away, Syme looked at his watch. "I've got eight forty-one," he said. "What've you got?"

"So do I," said Wallis.

One of the Shlage Lab people called out in a disappointed voice, "Is this one of those stupid crimes where the detective turns out to be the crook?" The crowd looked uneasy. But then Wallis faced his circle of suspects and raised an accusing finger.

Leon Briskin broke from the others in a dash toward the front gate. When the crowd blocked his way, he turned and started around the corner of the building. But Officer Darnley and Jesse Williams were waiting for him there. Trying to run around them through the churchyard, he tripped on a disapproving eyebrow of tombstone, fell flat, and struck his forehead on another.

The MacDougals walked back home through the night. "All those clocks striking the hour gave me the idea of synchronized watches," explained Wallis. "But that eliminated Mrs. Herbert, who didn't carry one, and her son. As for the Ospenskis, they were about as unsynchronized as you can get."

"So that left Porter, Briskin, and Syme," said Polly.

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"No, it wasn't Porter," said Wallis. "When he showed me his list of clocks for sale I saw what he wanted Pellat to see, too. That it was written on the same paper as the warning letter. Maybe Porter got wind of the impending crime. Or maybe, and more likely, it started out as his idea. Until he realized it was Sterling Herbert who'd end up as curator if Pellat got the axe. So why not warn Pellat? After all, Porter had clocks to sell and Pellat was a potential buyer. Which left Briskin and Syme."

"But Ospenski authenticated the clock. Briskin's reputation was saved," said Polly.

"True," said Wallis. "But don't forget, Briskin's a crook. He'd come with a plan to steal the clock. Why not use it to make himself a million dollars? All he had to do was get his accomplice to go along with him. When we were talking to the Ospenskis that little back-and-forth between him and Syme was renegotiating the deal."

They walked in silence for the rest of the way. Polly could sense the strut in her husband's step. But her thoughts were quickly elsewhere. Before they reached home she was well into her next short story. Polly would call it "The Neon Reproach," and it would begin . . .

Perky but tough, blessed with a brash spunkiness that took her where angels feared to tread, honey-tressed M. M. Q. Contreras unlocked the door and stepped into the office darkness. Every other second, the double flash of the three letters from the neon Virbitsk School of Dance sign outside the window illuminated the room. "TSK-TSK, TSK-TSK," went the neon as Contreras kicked off her three-inch stiletto heels with an audible sigh and padded straight for her frosted flutes and splits of champagne. As she reached for the door of the little refrigerator, she noticed a figure standing in a dark corner. Snatching the snub-nosed little Hrosko .32 from her handy décolleté holster, Contreras spun around. "All right, turkey. Out here where I can see you," she ordered.

"Don't shoot," stammered a man's voice. The intruder stepped forward. He was tall and thin and wore a gray fedora and a gray raincoat. His face was ashen and so was the big wag of hair on his chin.

"TSK-TSK, TSK-TSK," said the neon.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Contreras.

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The man tipped his hat and handed her his card. She cracked the door and read the name out loud by refrigerator light. "William G. Groff?"

"That's 'Gruff,' " he corrected her.

"It says 'Groff,' " she insisted.

"The printer made a mistake. So I got them for half price. So it's Gruff. But you can call me Billy G., Mary-Mary."

Contreras backhanded him hard across the bridge of his nose with her pistol hand and, gripping his chin hair, she pulled his face closer. "Who told you my name was Mary-Mary?"

"Over there on the wall," he gasped.

Cursing herself for forgetting to take down the plaque behind her desk with "Mary-Mary" spelled out in cockle shells and decorated all about with silver bells, Contreras demanded, "What the hell's this all about?"

"They're going to steal the judge's clock," said Gruff.

"Judge who?"

"Judge Dockerty."

"Which clock, the one in the oak case?"

"Nah," said Billy G.

"The bird's-eye-maple one?"

"Nah," said Billy G.

Contreras raised her pistol. "Goddamn it, Gruff, you started this stupid business, now spit it out!"

Billy G. swallowed so hard his chin hair wagged. "The Hickory Dockerty Clock, Mary-Mary," he admitted.

"TSK-TSK, TSK-TSK," came the neon reproach. ●

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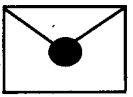

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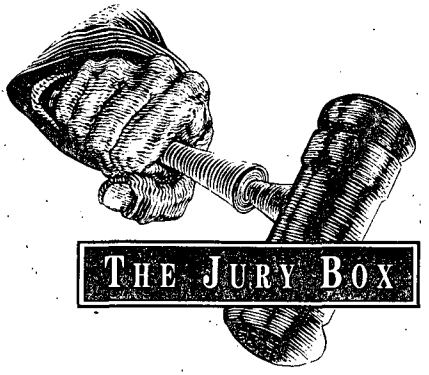

by Jon L. Breen

In any annual competition, whether it's Miss America or the Kentucky Derby or the movie Oscars, there are great years and solid years and relatively weak years. If there had been an Edgar Award for best American first mystery novel in 1929, contenders would have included Ellery Queen, Dashiell Hammett, and Mignon G. Eberhart, who launched one of the longest and most distinguished careers in American mystery fiction with the recently-reissued *The Patient in Room 18* (University of Nebraska Press, $9.95).

A hospital mystery introducing plucky narrator Nurse Sarah Keate and charismatic Great Detective Lance O'Leary, *Room 18* has many of the familiar features of mystery novels of its period: characters who sneak around acting suspicious, withholding information and dropping clues at every turn; an incredibly complicated solution; and a McGuffin (in this case a gram of radium) that moves from hiding place to hiding place as if possessing a will of its own. Eberhart would do better later, but many of her strengths are in place here: the ability to create a tense and brooding atmosphere, the leavening of humor, and the fully-drawn, prickly but likeable central character. In a novel that is a period piece without being a museum piece (an important distinction), the details of another time, notably the medical procedures and attitudes, are fascinating.

The same publisher has also reissued the second novel in the Keate series, 1930's *While the Patient Slept,* at the same price. Both books have meaty introductions by editor Jay

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Fultz and terrific surrealistic cover illustrations by Ed Lindlof, making the whole project an appropriate tribute to one of the last surviving Golden Age writers.

If not quite another 1929, 1985 was also a notable year for debuts. The Edgar winner, Jonathan Kellerman's *When the Bough Breaks,* launched a series that has become a fixture of the bestseller lists, and the best-known runner-up, Dick Lochte's *Sleeping Dog,* has achieved as near classic status as any novel so recent. Below are considered a new collection of short stories by another writer whose first mystery novel appeared in 1985, Ed Gorman; the most recent novels of Lochte and Kellerman; and the latest from two formidable writers from the also notable crop of 1984, K.K. Beck and Sharyn McCrumb.

**** Ed Gorman: *Cages and Other Stories,* Deadline Press, P.O. Box 2808, Apache Junction, AZ 85217; $35. Published in a limited edition of 500 copies, this generous 150,000-word collection demonstrates its author's ability to work in (and sometimes combine), a variety of fiction genres: detection, suspense, horror, fantasy, western, and science fiction. Among the highlights are "Moonchasers," a novella-length memoir of a fifties boyhood, and the 1993 *EQMM* story, "Seasons of the Heart." Gorman offers interesting afterwords for most of the stories.

*** Jonathan Kellerman, *Self-Defense,* Bantam, $22.95. In his ninth case, Southern California child psychologist sleuth Dr. Alex Delaware has an adult for a patient: a young woman, traumatized by her service as a juror in the trial of a serial killer, whose recurrent nightmare may hold clues to a crime that occurred when she was a small child. Among the characters is an aging literary icon whose career bears some resemblance to Norman Mailer's. While the book may not rank with the best of Delaware's cases, it confirms that this gifted storyteller's best-selling status is well-deserved.

*** Dick Lochte: *The Neon Smile,* Simon and Schuster, $21. The second novel about New Orleans private eye Terry Manion features the kind of complex structure its author specializes in. Hired by a tabloid TV show to look into the thirty-year-old murder of black militant Tyrone Pano, Manion finds connections to another mid-sixties case, the brutal crimes of a serial killer known as the Meddler. The book flashes back to the 1965 investigations of Manion's

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mentor, outsider homicide detective J.J. Legendre. Lochte sets the scene and deploys the characters and plot elements with a pro's practiced touch.

*** Sharyn McCrumb: *If I'd Killed Him When I Met Him . . .*, Ballantine, $20. McCrumb also combines past and present crime, as forensic anthropologist Elizabeth MacPherson tries to solve two cases of arsenic poisoning, occurring in the same house a century apart. On the plus side, McCrumb is readable as ever, juggling several plotlines with skill and providing solutions to the two arsenic cases that merit the novel's inclusion in any list of outstanding poisoning mysteries. On the minus side, MacPherson and her family are a more exasperating group than ever, from a mother with no trust (perhaps appropriately) in her children to a brother who must be the slowest-witted lawyer in all of fiction; and the comic subplots, involving a woman betrothed to a dolphin and the mother's apparent re-emergence as a radical lesbian, detract from the main story line.

*** K.K. Beck: *Cold Smoked,* Mysterious, $18.95. If you like educational mysteries, try this specialized background: seafood journalism. Investigating the murder of a hostess at a Seattle fishing industry convention, Jane da Silva, forced into sleuthing for the fourth time under the terms of her detective uncle's nutty will, becomes a reporter for *Seafood Now* and travels to Norway and the Shetland Isles. Beck is among the most amusing, readable, and versatile of current crime writers.

*** Perri O'Shaughnessy: *Motion to Suppress,* Delacorte, $21.95. Courtroom fiction buffs will relish this first novel from the sister collaboration that took second in the recent MWA short-story contest. Lake Tahoe attorney Nina Reilly defends a casino waitress accused of the murder of her abusive husband. Part of the elaborate and surprising double-whammy climax invites more comment than the ethics of mystery reviewing permit. A hint: The first name of one participant will bring a smile to fans of the courtroom genre.

Cathleen Jordan and Cynthia Manson have combed the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM* for *Murder Most Medical* (Carroll & Graf, $21), finding vintage medical puzzles from Dorothy L. Sayers, Michael Innes, and Conan Doyle, along with newer tales, including a clever case for Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Hawthorne, "The Problem of the Dying Patient."

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A PUBLIC SERVICE

by David Williams

With seventeen whodunits already to his credit, Londoner David Williams introduced a new series character last year, a Welsh policeman, Chief Inspector Merlin Perry. In his review of *Last Seen Breathing,* in which Perry debuted, crime novelist James Melville said, "The author is deliciously adept at portraying the proper facades of the respectable classes." It is to the "respectable classes" that Mr. Williams turns again here. ¶

The four men had played bridge on the first Monday of every month for several years. They met in the basement cardroom of the Renaissance Club of London's Pall Mall at six and played until ten, breaking for drinks and sandwiches at around eight. If one of them was away, a stand-in was sometimes recruited to make a fourth for the game, but more often the meeting would be cancelled. The four were close friends who in truth valued each other's company more than they did the bridge.

All of the four lived in London, and each was distinguished in his own field. Sir Rodger Godber was a Crown Court judge. Felix Rice, recently created Lord Rice, had once been a cabinet minister, but was now chairman of one large public company and a director of several others. Richard Steen was a senior Harley Street cardiologist. Clive Wallace was a prominent architect, and a widower, which made him the only unmarried member of the group.

"But Clive's hypothesis is quite simple. It assumes one of us is told he's going to die in three months. That he can use the chance to rid the world of someone or something vile. In short, to perform a . . . a public service. Isn't that right, Clive?" questioned Rice, the ex-politician, in his deep, resonant voice. He took a tentative sip of the claret which had just been poured,

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raised the glass a foot in front of his eyes, twisted the stem, admired the colour of the wine against the light, then treated himself to a more serious draught. Rice was a heavy man, with a well-fed face, prominent ears, domineering eyebrows, and an avuncular expression that had mesmerised a majority of the voters in a Surrey constituency over two decades.

"That's more or less the idea, yes," Clive Wallace answered, but hesitantly. "Assuming that if the action is illegal, that even if he's found out, it won't matter because there'll be no time for trial and punishment. Naturally, he'd have to leave a confession to be read after his death. To stop anyone else being blamed for what he'd done."

"Naturally," Rice echoed vigorously in the practised politician's reflex manner of agreeing to anything virtuous on principle.

It was the first Monday in a freezing February. The friends had played two rubbers and had stopped for refreshments, which had appeared on the cleared card table without summons. Perkins, the wiry, attentive cardroom night steward, was normally stationed in the small dispense bar and buttery between the cardroom and the library. He had brought the laden silver tray through after checking the progress of the bridge game by partly opening a sliding wooden panel behind the seat in his aerie.

It was common for stimulating discussion to break out between the four friends at this point. If the present topic was on the surface more serious than some in the past, it appeared also to be fairly academic—and no less so to His Honour Judge Godber than to the others.

Godber was a small, neat man. His voice was high and penetrating, and he clipped his consonants. Now he sniffed and made a steeple with sensitive, well-manicured fingers. "But if one of us had really been told he'd contracted some wasting or anyway terminal condition, and that death was so imminent, why should it follow he should contemplate murder?" he demanded. He jerked his head back as if it were controlled by cogs, then his quizzical gaze swept the others as he continued. "In such circumstances, for my part, I'd be inclined to divide the time left to me between riotous living and earnest communing with my Maker. Mark you, I'm not sure in what proportion the time would be allocated between the two." He gave the self-indulgent smile of

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a judge overly amused by his own double drollery, and who expected others to be equally entertained.

"The idea of assassination as a public service followed what Felix was saying earlier about ridding the world of despots," said Wallace. "I can think of . . ."

"It would still mean taking the law into one's own hands, of course," Godber interrupted, leaning forward for his glass, his words more considered than before. "No one can do that with impunity, particularly if it involves taking another's life. Dangerous thinking altogether."

"And very likely impossible in a deeply ill man." This was Steen, the physician, speaking for the first time, since he had thus far been too involved in eating and drinking to do anything else. Tall, dark, slim, and polished in appearance as well as manner, he had the urbane, chiselled features of a well-preserved, if matured, matinée idol. "Setting off to shoot some dictator in a far-off land would hardly be within the scope of a seriously weakened patient." He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "These spiced-chicken sandwiches are very Moorish. I'm going to order an extra round," he completed, hand moving forward energetically to help himself to the last of the delicacies.

"Don't know how you keep so slim," grumbled Rice. "You're right, though, Richard. I couldn't begin to match the energy and fire power of an SAS man, even without being seriously weakened by illness." He gave a despairing glance at his bulging waistcoat with its gold watchchain and fob adornments.

Clive Wallace shook his head, which had a frieze of unruly hair standing up straight above it. This helped make his long thin face with its rough skin and sharply pointed chin vaguely reminiscent of a dried-up carrot. He was altogether less well turned out than the others. This was partly because he no longer had a wife to care for him, but more because he was unkempt by nature. "I didn't suppose assassination would be the only choice. I did say the elimination of someone or *something* vile."

"Murder of some dictator was the natural first choice though," said Rice.

"Might be in your case, Felix," remarked Steen with his mouth full. "But remember, I've taken the Hippocratic oath."

"Not to kill people, you mean? Not on purpose anyway," Rice responded with a chuckle.

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"Well, if a dying member of this club couldn't think of a more worthy last act than shooting a political gangster, I wish I'd never joined it. I mean, the Renaissance is supposed to be dedicated to defending aesthetic values," said Wallace crossly, and reddening alarmingly. It was apparent he had been unusually irritated at the others' levity. "I mean, a dictator would probably only last another five to ten years anyway," he went on. "For God's sake, there are perfectly monstrous *buildings* all over the place that'll stand for hundreds of years, insulting the aesthetic sensibilities and degrading the tastes of whole generations, unless someone blows them up. Why not make your last act the destruction of one of those? Or even several?" He took a large gulp of wine.

Covert, baffled glances were being exchanged between Godber and Steen as Rice observed soothingly, "Yes, there's a good deal of sense in that, Clive."

"I agree," Godber volunteered, like the others disturbed by the architect's unusual fury. "The buildings would need to be empty of people, of course."

"Oh, and of fine works of art," agreed Wallace, now calmer and lighting a cigarette. "That still leaves dozens of monstrosities to choose from."

"The choice would remain a matter of artistic opinion, I suppose?" Rice debated, but choosing his words carefully so as not to upset Wallace again.

"Yes, but of an elementary kind. Would you like my first twenty eyesores to be going along with?" Wallace asked promptly.

"Well, let's say your first four, old chap," put in Steen. "I don't think I'd contemplate blowing up more than four buildings. Not if I was seriously under par. And that's apart from not knowing where you get the dynamite, though I suppose you would, Clive, wouldn't you? Oh, well done, Perkins." He nodded warmly at the steward who had brought in his extra chicken sandwich.

"First choice has to be the council offices in Broncaster. Completed in nineteen sixty-one. A colossal concrete abortion," announced Wallace with decision, puffing out smoke, then self-consciously waving it away from the others.

"Don't know the building. Hardly know Broncaster. Never in the Northeast," Godber commented, pouring himself more claret.

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"Well, I have to be up there every week at the moment," Wallace countered. "You can take my word for it, that building takes the biscuit for unredeemed ghastliness."

"Right, off with its head," cried Steen, waving a hand with his sandwich knife in it.

"Late at night, when there's nobody there," Rice added.

"Of course," Wallace agreed. "Then there's St. Mary's Church, Seldon. That's in Strathclyde."

"Oh, steady on. Can't blow up a church," protested Rice, as always on the side of the angels, publicly at least.

"I could blow up this one," offered Judge Godber unexpectedly. "Funny, I was shown pictures of it only the other day by someone who took the same view of it as Clive. Another sixties blot on the landscape all right. A quite brutal structure that certainly does nothing to glorify God, inside or out. Parishioners hate it, apparently, but they can't afford to knock it down and build a new church."

"It'll be insured though," said Wallace quietly.

"Hm," Rice uttered to excuse real commitment.

"Right. Down with St. Mary's," announced Steen, the self-appointed arbiter.

"Then there's the Gwent Shipping Insurance Company's headquarters in Cardiff."

"But that's been there since my grandmother's time," Rice demurred, adding gratuitously, "She was Welsh, you know."

"And it's likely to be there beyond your great-grandchildren's time, Felix," said Wallace. "They put a preservation order on it last year. Its only alleged virtues are that it's red brick and Victorian."

"I know the building. It's hideous," said Godber. "Even Betjeman thought as much."

"So that's another one for the chop," Steen pronounced promptly. "And your last candidate, Clive? Remember, you've had one in England, one in Scotland, and one in Wales. Will you go for Ireland now?"

Wallace shook his head. "Not if I'm restricted to four. The last will be a lot nearer home. It's the old Waterwood Tyre factory on the Great West Road. Empty now, but it's a protected building, and the innards are being converted to a different use. We were offered the job, but refused it on principle."

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"I remember reading the Ministry had added it to the protected list," put in Rice. "God knows why. All those white tiles, and that gimcrack tower. Looks like a giant public convenience. I agree, thoroughly bad taste. Always was."

"Good. That's the lot then. Can we get back to the bridge? My deal, I think," said Steen, who'd had his fill of wine and sandwiches—and what he considered to have been a somewhat vacuous discussion.

"Meant to say, extraordinary coincidence that church being blown up yesterday. In Seldon. I mean, only four days after the Broncaster council offices were burnt to the ground," remarked Lord Rice, before returning to his fish soup.

It was two weeks later. Rice and Steen were lunching together at the Renaissance Club.

"Extraordinary, yes. Suggests Clive Wallace was pretty perceptive in his choice of awful buildings."

Rice looked up, his laden soup spoon poised unsteadily between plate and mouth. "You don't mean you think there's a gang of sort of . . . aesthetic saboteurs at work?"

The heart specialist grinned. "No, that'd be too much of a coincidence. Though I think the church may have been destroyed on purpose."

"So do the police and the insurance company. The *Times* says they're mounting a joint investigation."

"Hmm. More likely it was vandals than parishioners wanting a new church, at no expense to themselves." Steen whisked up the last small sliver of smoked salmon from his plate with regret.

"Probably," Rice agreed. "And I expect the Broncaster fire was an accident. Still, two out of four's a pretty good score." He cleared his throat. "I, er . . . I suppose old Clive's all right, is he?" he added, watching the other man's face.

"Let's hope so," Steen responded enigmatically, even though he knew better than that.

It had been on the Thursday after the last Monday bridge evening that Clive Wallace had consulted Richard Steen professionally, at the urgent request of Wallace's own general practitioner. What the GP and the specialist had both provisionally diagnosed as angina had proved to be just that following an immediate stress test, and an angiogram the next day.

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Steen had advised his sixty-two-year-old friend and patient that heart bypass surgery was indicated without delay, followed by three months of recuperation. Wallace had pleaded that he had too many important projects on the go that couldn't be abandoned straightaway. The physician, even at his most adamant, had failed to shift the other's obstinate attitude over this, but eventually it had been agreed that Wallace would have the operation in six weeks. Meantime he promised to give up smoking, to take pills as prescribed, to carry an alleviating inhalant against emergencies, and to avoid being provoked—Steen's first inkling of Wallace's likely problem had been the way the architect's face had so suddenly suffused with anger that evening when the others had upset him.

It was ten days after Steen and Rice had lunch together that Wallace's third nominated building was destroyed by fire. The Cardiff offices of Gwent Shipping Insurance had been set alight by four incendiary bombs timed to detonate in the middle of the Friday night. As with the two buildings already demolished, there had been no loss of life, and no damage to other property—nor any likelihood of either hazard. The insurance company's headquarters had been empty—and, again just like the others, it had stood alone on an island site.

These assuaging facts were not nearly assuaging enough for the agitated Lord Rice when he telephoned Sir Rodger Godber first thing on the Saturday morning.

"You've heard the news of the Cardiff fire, Rodger?"

"Yes, Felix, on the wireless when I was shaving." The judge nearly added that he would have preferred to have finished his breakfast before coming to the phone to discuss the matter, but he didn't.

"You realise this is the third of Clive Wallace's buildings to be burnt down?"

"The church was blown up, wasn't it?" Godber corrected with a lawyer's exactitude. He was speaking into the wall telephone in the kitchen, and making signs to his wife to bring him his coffee cup from the table, except she was too engrossed in the newspaper crossword puzzle to notice.

"Burned or bombed, it's all the same. They've been irresponsibly destroyed, and we know exactly who's done it," thundered Rice.

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"I thought you were quite approving of Clive's list?"

"Nonsense. That was just during a . . . a frivolous discussion. Nobody took it seriously."

"Except Clive, you think?"

"Well, don't you?"

"What I may think and what I know of the matter are quite separate considerations," Godber pronounced in a measured way, beaming at his wife, who had at last seen his signal.

"Oh, stop being so bloody pedantic, Felix. You're as bad as Richard Steen."

"Richard's being pedantic about Clive?"

"No, evasive. He's pretending he knows nothing about Clive's state of health, but I found out Clive's been to see him recently."

"Clive told you that?"

There was a loud clearing of the throat from the other end. "Not exactly. I, er . . . I rang him to make a lunch date shortly after the second fire—I mean the bombing of the Seldon church," Rice corrected quickly. "He wasn't in London. His secretary said he was in Glasgow for two days. You realise Seldon's only twelve miles from there? And guess where he'd been the week before?"

"In Broncaster, probably. He told us he went there every week, don't you remember?"

"No." There was a brief pause. "Well, perhaps I do. Anyway, he was there the night of the fire. And if he was in Cardiff yesterday, that would clinch it, wouldn't it?"

"Was he in Cardiff yesterday?" the judge asked cautiously.

"I don't know," was the strained reply. "But I mean to find out."

"Good. You can ask him on Monday. It's our bridge night."

"He may not come. Anyway, it may be too late by then. And remember, Clive's seen Richard. That was just after the February bridge night."

"He saw him professionally, you mean?"

There was some more throat clearing from Rice. "He saw him, that's all I can say. It came up in my conversation with his secretary."

"So he could have been seeing him for lunch, or golf?"

"Look, Felix, you're a High Court judge and if . . ."

"Crown Court, actually," Godber corrected automatically and with feeling. He had expected to be promoted to the higher court the previous June, but had been disappointed.

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"Well, you're a judge anyway. It'll be a pretty state of affairs if it comes out you knew Clive's been dynamiting buildings. . . ."

"I have no such knowledge, Felix," Godber retaliated hotly. "I was merely present when we lightheartedly discussed what one might do in one's last days, if one succumbed to a terminal illness. Clive said that he'd demolish some ugly buildings. I'm not aware that he has since become terminally ill. If he has, I'm deeply sorry, but I very much doubt he'd actually carry through such a frivolous resolve."

"Well, I'm absolutely certain he would. Don't you remember how serious he sounded? Anyway, it'd look awful in the papers if it came out. You, a judge, tacitly condoning . . ."

"I've condoned nothing, tacitly or otherwise, and in any case you'd be just as culpable as I am."

"Culpable. That's the word all right. But I'm not a judge."

"But you're an ex-cabinet minister, and on the boards of I don't know how many companies."

"That's different. Readers of the gutter press assume all politicians and company directors are liars who withhold the truth for private gain. They expect judges to have higher standards. Altogether, I think you should do something without delay."

"Like what?" Godber was beginning to admit to himself that there was something in what Rice had been saying, though he was equally certain the man was more concerned for his own reputation than anyone else's.

"You could go and see Clive. He's only round the corner from you." Godber and Wallace both lived in South Kensington, while Rice's house was in Hampstead. "You could face him with the evidence."

"Coincidence isn't evidence."

"*Three* buildings destroyed is more than coincidence. Well, if you don't feel like tackling Clive, at least you could call Richard Steen."

"So could you."

"He wouldn't tell me if he knew Clive was dying. Doctors treat patient information as if they'd heard it in the confessional."

"I should hope so, too. So why should Richard confide in me?"

"Because judges are bound by the same sort of code, aren't they?"

"First I've heard of it." Godber paused, frowning into his now empty coffee cup. "All right, I'll do what I can. No promises."

"Good man. Let me know . . ."

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"I said no promises, Felix. Cheerio, and . . . and love to Madge."

An hour later, Godber and Steen met by telephoned arrangement in the broad walk in Kensington Gardens. They had come from opposite directions. Steen lived in Bayswater, just north of the park. Although both men were well wrapped up against the east wind—Godber in a British-warm overcoat, Steen in a too pristine, waxed shooting jacket—the sky was clear and blue, the sun shining, and the early-morning frost had almost evaporated.

"You haven't spoken to Felix again?" Steen enquired after the two had removed gloves briefly to shake hands, and then turned to stride eastwards toward the Round Pond.

"Certainly not. Not since I called in on Clive at nine. I must say, he looked fitter than I've seen him for some time."

"Hmm, I'm glad to hear it."

"He's given up smoking, as you ordered. Said it was a lot easier than he'd expected."

"In his case easier than the possible dire consequences of not giving it up. Surprising how the risk of death concentrates the resolve. Anyway, I'm glad he told you about his heart problem, and the operation. You understood, I couldn't have told you myself?"

"Naturally. Is his condition very dangerous?"

Steen sniffed. "It's not immediately life-threatening."

"But might he think it was?"

"Possibly. I had to put the fear of God in him to get him to agree to the operation. I see what you're getting at. D'you really believe it's he who's destroying these buildings? As he said, a final act in the public service, and all that?"

"He denies it vehemently."

"I suppose he'd have to. Apart from anything else, to protect the rest of us. Could we in any way be considered, er . . . accessories to his crimes?"

"Hardly. Just bloody fools, if it came out. Which, in a way, is worse. That's assuming he's committed any crimes."

"But with three out of the four buildings on his list gone already—I mean, it does seem rather more than coincidence."

"That's what Felix said, of course. But you could both be wrong." The judge rearranged the red muffler he was wearing as he went on. "If Clive has frequent occasion currently to be visiting Glasgow, Broncaster, and . . . and perhaps Cardiff, it's not surprising his most unfavourite buildings in those places

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would be the first ones he'd have nominated for destruction in a . . . in a . . ." The speaker hesitated, making an airy circle with one hand. "In a fanciful kind of way."

"Because he'd have them in the front of his mind, you mean?"

"Precisely."

"Is he coming to the club on Monday night?"

"I imagine so." If one of the group had to miss a bridge evening, it was usual for the individual concerned to phone Godber.

"Well, I'm sure it'll help us all if he tells us he's not responsible for the mayhem." Steen paused, then added, "You mentioned Cardiff. He hasn't actually been there too?"

Godber's shoulders moved from side to side uneasily. "I don't propose we tell Felix Rice," he said, "but, yes, I'm afraid Clive was near there yesterday. He drove back late last night. He told me as much, though I confess he did so a touch reluctantly."

Steen stopped in his tracks, hands thrust deeply into the patch pockets of his jacket. "But was he actually in Cardiff? Where the fire was last night?"

"No, further west, in Swansea. He's supervising some rebuilding there."

"But he must have driven back through Cardiff?"

"Round it certainly. On the M4 motorway." They fell into step again, taking a path that leads across to Lancaster Walk as Godber continued. "Clive swears he had nothing to do with the fire there. But if Felix knew Clive had been anywhere near South Wales, I shudder to think what action he might take. He was threatening this morning to tell the owners of the Waterwood building to have it guarded at night." The speaker made a face, squeezing his eyes tightly together. "It's unsettling to accept that it might be the prudent thing to do, of course."

"On the contrary, it could be disastrous for Clive. If the police had reason to question him. To accuse him of anything," the cardiologist pronounced with great firmness. "His heart's just not up to that kind of trauma."

"But there's no reason why he should be questioned. The police don't know anything about our discussion at the club."

"Not yet, they don't." Steen shook his head. "Felix is so unpredictable. If he was asked to explain how he knew the Waterwood place was in danger, he could easily give the whole thing away."

"I see." The judge straightened his small frame even more as the two turned right onto the main concrete walk. There was calculation in his gaze too, which was fixed on the boarded-up

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Albert Memorial lying a few hundred yards in front of them. "Very well," he resolved. "I'll tell Felix that I'll warn the Waterwood people myself about possible danger to the building. That's what he really wants in any case."

"But how will you explain you know?"

"I shan't."

"But if the police are told, they'll press you for an explanation, surely?"

Godber's eyebrows moved up and down. "In that event, I shall tell them what policemen have been telling me in my court with impunity for many years past. I'll say an informer told me. A snout." The judge nodded, looking extremely pleased with himself.

It was late on the evening of the following day, Sunday, that the old Waterwood factory on the Great West Road was burnt to a cinder, and early on the Monday morning that firemen searching through the debris discovered the charred remains of a human body.

"There's still no reply from his flat," said Felix Rice, rejoining the others in the otherwise empty cardroom of the Renaissance Club. It was just after six-thirty on Monday evening. Rice, Steen, and Godber had all arrived before the hour. It was unusual for any of the bridge players to be seriously late, and when there had been no sign of Wallace at six twenty-five, it was Rice who had gone to telephone his flat from one of the payphones in the main hall.

"His office . . . " Godber began.

"Have been saying since this morning they didn't expect him in today," Rice interrupted. "I rang them three times."

"And they'd no idea where he could be reached?" enquired Steen.

"I told you, none," answered Rice, picking up the whisky he had abandoned earlier. "His secretary's away, but the woman I kept speaking to said there were no appointments in his diary either. Surely even an architect wouldn't go a whole weekday without checking at least once with his office?" continued a man who prided himself on the orderliness of his life. "Well, it's clear to me he's destroyed that building like the others, except this time he's stayed in it on purpose. Didn't want to face the operation, I expect, nor life as some kind of invalid. I'm positive it's his body they've found," he completed.

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"Well, no one else is. The police aren't, for a start," Steen insisted. "The report on the radio said there was no quick way of identifying the body from what was left."

"It couldn't have been a caretaker because there wasn't one. They said that too. There was only a mobile security patrol that called by once a night," said Godber in a morose tone. He had intended to telephone the owners of the building with his warning immediately after the weekend, but immediately after the weekend had proved to be too late.

"Teeth survive fires, don't they?" asked Rice suddenly. "Did Clive still have his own teeth?"

"Yes, and if the dead body's his, his dental records will no doubt prove it," Steen answered.

"So we should put the police on to his dentist right away," said Rice. "D'you know who that is, Richard?"

"I do, yes. Chap in Upper Wimpole Street. I'd thought of that already, but it's too early. Once we alert the police, if the body isn't Clive, he's still implicated. Better to wait a day or two, in case the authorities come up with other takers. And if it is Clive's body, there'll be a letter from him to someone, explaining things. One of us, possibly. I'm sure of it."

"I agree," offered Godber swiftly, temporarily forestalling Rice who, judging from the expression on his face, was strongly against delay.

"Well, I see no purpose in prevarication. We should accept our bounden duty in the matter," Rice insisted, with righteous fervour. "One of us must inform the authorities now that he's reason to believe it's Clive Wallace's body they've found, and that it was Clive Wallace who set fire to the building. I think it should be you, Rodger. No need to tell them how you know, of course." He cleared his throat, folded his arms across his chest, and glanced around defiantly at the others in the manner of a man who had dutifully passed a heavy responsibility on to someone else.

It was at that moment that Clive Wallace himself appeared in the doorway of the cardroom. He looked more dishevelled than usual, seriously out of breath, but far from dead. "I'm dreadfully sorry to be so late," he uttered, closing the door and slumping into the empty chair at the card table with a deep sigh. "There's the mother and father of all traffic jams in Holborn. Would you believe, my taxi's taken fifty minutes to get here from Euston station? I'd no chance to ring you, of course."

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It was Godber who broke the following uncomfortable silence. "Been North, have you, Clive?" he enquired, with an earnestness indicating that Wallace's response would be of more than passing interest.

The architect grinned sheepishly. "Manchester, actually. It's where my secretary's parents live. You see, er . . . she and I, er . . . well, we got married this morning."

There was a further silence, this time more stunned than uncomfortable, as each of the other three debated the reasons why a putative arsonist on the brink of death should decide to embark on matrimony.

"Congratulations," offered Rice eventually, forcing a smile while speculating about which of Manchester's less attractive buildings Wallace might have singled out for firing while he happened to be in the area. The others made supportive noises.

"You're probably wondering what came over me," said Wallace with searing accuracy. "Fact is, Eve and I, that's her name, Eve, we've been talking of marriage for some time. She's no bimbo, you understand? In her early fifties, actually. Divorced some years back." He gave a weak, embarrassed cough. "Well, when Richard here gave me the bad news you all know about, we decided to speed things up. I mean, if I fall off the perch as a result of this heart thing, or because of the operation, at least Eve will inherit my estate, such as it is. There's no one else, you see? I've no family at all. We made the final decision a fortnight ago. Got a special license. Today was the earliest time it could be used." He paused to take a deep breath. "We did the deed at the Dewsbury Register Office. It was just the two of us, with her parents and her brother and his wife as witnesses. Didn't want any fuss. It's why we didn't tell our friends. Not anyone." He looked around guiltily at the other three. "I'm sorry. And for being late tonight."

"We all understand, of course," said Godber, swallowing awkwardly. "But, er . . . is your wife with you?" He looked about him, as though the lady might have entered the room unobserved, although if she had she would have been trespassing in a members only section of the club.

"No," Wallace replied. "Seems daft, I know, but it's only the actual ceremony we covered today. I've got a load of work on for the rest of the week, most of it out of the office. Then there's the operation. We've decided to delay the honeymoon till I'm far

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enough into recuperation for us to go on a long cruise. Eve's staying with her parents till midweek."

"Good. Sound thinking," said Steen with genuine and professionally underwritten enthusiasm. He got up and pressed the service bell at the side of the fireplace. "Meantime, a glass of celebratory champagne will do you no harm. We can't holler for things tonight, unfortunately. Perkins isn't here for some reason. We're having to order everything through the main bar."

"There's just one thing, Clive," said Rice carefully. "Er, you must have heard that the Waterwood building was destroyed by fire last night. Since that's another of your . . ."

"Ah, Mr. Wallace, got a letter for you, sir. Didn't know you were here," said Merit, the club's senior night steward, who had just entered in response to the bell. Garrulous by nature, he was old, increasingly hard of hearing, and was unaware that he had interrupted anyone. He searched in the side pocket of his white jacket, produced an envelope, and handed it to Wallace. "It's from Ernest Perkins, sir. You know he's retired through ill health? Well, perhaps you didn't, not any of you, not if you haven't been in of an evening since this time last month. Very sudden it was, three weeks ago. It's cancer, I'm afraid, with not much time left to him, according to his doctor. Bachelor, he is, with no dependants. There was talk of him getting into one of those hospice places, but he isn't keen." The old man shook his head. "Been with us twenty years. Nearly as long as me. That's since he left the regular army, of course. Sergeant, he was there. Thinks the world of you four gentlemen, he does, especially you, Mr. Wallace. Dead keen on fine buildings, see? Goes to look at all your buildings, he does, and not just the ones in London either."

His face drawn, Wallace looked up from reading the letter, which he passed to Godber. It was handwritten, short, and to the point—a combined confession and suicide note. It left no doubt about who had destroyed the four eyesores and whose body would be found in the Waterwood building.

"I never knew Perkins was an ex-regular soldier," said Wallace slowly. "What outfit was he in, do you know?"

"Royal Engineers, sir," Merit replied. "Specialist, he was. In demolition and bomb disposal. Nothing he doesn't know about that kind of thing."

"I'm sure there . . . wasn't," Godber agreed with a sigh, partly in sorrow, but also in some relief. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE PREMIUM ON A PARCEL

by D. P. Roy-Myers

No day was so bright, no hope so sunny, that my old neighbor Mrs. Whelan couldn't cast a blight on it. Say you were going to plant a rose and she'd tell you what it was subject to: mildew, aphids, white fly. Plant a tree and she'd tell you what a mess the blossoms made, what a trial it was going to be to rake up the leaves. She was a pessimist, a grump, and a nonstop complainer, with the pinched and pickled expression of someone who had been hard done by since birth. But no one is all bad, and Mrs. Whelan was hygienic; the "Mrs. Clean" realtors describe in ads for homes that don't have much else to recommend them.

Occasionally, I amused myself imagining her tombstone:

As we might have guessed from her fiction, First Stories author D.P. Roy-Myers is an avid gardener and birdwatcher. She makes her home in Pasadena, California, and currently works in advertising. In her previous employment at the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History, she was responsible for all of the museum's general interest publications and wrote many nonfiction articles. With this first story, she launches a new career as a fiction writer. ¶

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HERE LIES

EUDORA MOTT WHELAN

A REALLY IMMACULATE HOUSEKEEPER

WIPE YOUR FEET!

The stone would be white, of course, white as a kitchen sink, and crowned with a sour little angel, wielding a vacuum cleaner.

Though I could think of a lot of reasons for wishing her dead, I never imagined killing her. Never. Never.

Not everyone can retire at twenty-eight. I'd been a mortician, one of the first of my sex licensed in the state, but I sold the family mortuary the week I inherited it. When I bought the house next-door to Mrs. Whelan's, I was determined I was going to live a life devoted to . . . well, life, I guess.

In the sixties, our street was all one-story clapboard beach houses, with broad verandas, pedestal lavatories, tubs with claw feet, and outside showers to wash off the sand. The house was nothing much, but I loved the ancient sycamore spreading over it, the wisteria draping the porch, and the swallows nesting in the eaves.

The house was a bonus.

The first morning it was so still I could hear waves breaking in the distance, and nearer, leaves rustling, the squeak of swallows' wings, and the fervent chirps of nestlings. It was better by far than anything I'd ever popped, smoked, or snorted. Then, I heard a scraping sound, thumps, and bangs. Just outside my living-room window I caught a little woman flailing at the eaves of my house with a long-handled rake, while the birds swooped and cried.

"Hey, you! What the hell do you think you're doing? Stop that! Stop that right now."

She dropped the rake and clutched her aproned bosom. "Goodness! You gave me such a start! I didn't know anyone had moved in yet."

"What are you doing?"

"Damn birds"—she bent down to recover the rake—"only way to get rid of 'em is knock their nests down. Otherwise they'll be perching on the telephone wires over my driveway, doing their business, leaving their mess."

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"I don't want to get rid of them. I like them."

"But they're dirty," she said. *"Dirty!* I don't want them staining my driveway."

I looked at the mud, the bits of shell littering the ground, and the tiny naked bodies, some still moving. I was stunned. "You did this on account of a few bird droppings?"

She drew herself up. "You've got a lot to learn about being a neighbor, young lady."

Through the summer, Mrs. Whelan and I largely ignored one another. Occasionally, I saw her out in her front yard, eyeing the guys working on my house. Sometimes we ran into one another at the mom and pop grocery store up on the highway. Once, when we were waiting in the checkout line, she asked me if the man I'd hired to replace the old-fashioned knob-and-tube wiring in my house was *reliable.*

I grinned. My electrician had long scraggly hair, a sexy off-center smile, and tattoos in places I'd never seen them before. "Reliable. Yes. Very," I said aloud. Also inventive. And damn near inexhaustible. I'd even bought a water bed. I gave Mrs. Whelan his business card. Why not? Robbie had done wonders for *my* knobs and tubes.

But Robbie didn't last a morning with Mrs. Whelan, who was so overwhelmed with the mess he was making, she couldn't let him work.

"I'd go out to the truck for something and when I came back, there she was with her dustpan and broom. I tried to tell her to just leave it be till I was finished, but no. Kept saying she didn't know *why* I couldn't be more careful! Said she'd never seen such a mess. More she cleaned, madder she got. At me! Who was only trying to do what she was paying me for!"

"Please," I said. "You're making the bed slosh."

"Like I was supposed to rewire her damn walls without a little wood or plaster falling. She said she was gonna tell her son on me."

A son? Mrs. Whelan had a son? Amazing she'd done anything so untidy as to marry, let alone have a kid.

The second autumn I lived there, a freak storm stripped the blond leaves from my sycamore and dumped almost all of them

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on Mrs. Whelan's front yard. The morning after, she stood out there ankle-deep in wet leaves and indignation.

I knew she was lying in wait for me because I saw her from my living-room window; saw her and went back for another cup of coffee.

Finally, of course, I had to go out.

"Look at this mess!" Her rigid finger pointed down. *"Will—you—just—look!* I suppose you think I should clean it up. Well, I won't. It's your tree. Your leaves. *Your dirty mess."*

She was near seventy; I might have been kinder. But she'd reminded me of my swallows. The mature birds had vanished; even the ones on the far side of my house.

"You have a rake," I said. "Use it."

Unlike the swallows, my golden-haired electrician still came back. When I told him about Mrs. Whelan, he suggested I put a contract out on her. "Guy knew what he was doing could make it look like an accident. Old bat like that. Be doin' the world a favor."

I swung my legs out of bed. "Want some tea?"

He rolled over, propping his head up with his hand. "Forty-five percent of domestic fires are 'unexplained.' Bet I could do one. Trick is not to be fancy; work off something that's already there."

"Tea," I said again.

"Old clothes. Papers. Oily dust rags. She's got a pile a those, for sure." He grinned. "Make you a deal. Fix your wiring and hers for one low, low price."

"Red Zinger. Or Sleepytime?"

A few years later, Wendell, Mrs. Whelan's son, showed up. He worked around the place while his mother sat in state on a peeling lawn chair and crabbed. "There's a spot you missed," she'd say when he was painting, or raking, or watering, or washing down her driveway—didn't matter which. "Look at that," she'd say, pointing her finger. "Right there! Don't know *why* you can't be more careful."

And he'd sigh and say, "I'll get around to it, Mama."

"What?" she'd say. "What?"

I don't think he enjoyed it much—but I sure did. By then, my beautiful electrician was into somebody else's knobs and tubes,

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but looking at Wendell was compensation enough. I'd see him, tanned and glistening with sweat, spading his mother's side yard, and I'd wander over to pass the time of day. Mrs. Whelan didn't like it much. I once heard her tell Wendell I wasn't so damn neighborly when he wasn't there.

The freeway came through in '71, connecting our little beach town with the city. Home prices soared and the old-timers cashed out. At first, the newcomers were content with refurbishing the old bungalows, but as the decade wore on the neighborhood went condo.

Huge three- and four-story buildings shot up, sprouting flags and banners: Colonial Builders present SEABREEZE TOWNHOMES: Two bedrooms, two baths, a/c, forced-air heat, and all amenities including a "greenhouse" window (two foot by three). People bought them. Camped out for the chance.

And because of them the town changed, too. The burger-and-shake stands along the highway were shouldered out by brokerages, boutiques, and trendy restaurants where ladies wore hats to eat lunch.

One morning I found myself standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Mrs. Whelan watching a Colonial Builders bulldozer attack the last old bungalow across the street. Belching smoke, kicking up gravel with its treads, it charged the porch. For a moment, the house seemed to resist, then it groaned, splintered, and gave way with a crack I felt in my heart.

I looked at Mrs. Whelan and she looked at me. "I won't sell to those damn Colony boys if you won't," she said.

In the decades that followed, I grew more shade plants as the ones that loved sun dwindled and died in the shadow of the four-story condominium to the south of my property.

I replaced my waterbed with a Sealy Posturepedic.

I voted for Reagan.

Wendell got married. His new wife, Earlene, was in real estate. She was thirty years younger than Wendell and twenty-eight years younger than me. She had a baby voice, sheep hair, and fingernails longer than any I'd seen outside a Barbra Streisand movie.

I was a little disappointed in Wendell.

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Mrs. Whelan changed, too; tiny and twisted, she looked like one of those little Appalachian folk dolls with a dried-apple face, button eyes, and one shiny tooth. The minute she saw me watering my flowers, she shuffled down the driveway in the tattered old bedroom slippers she had taken to wearing the last few years: *swish, swish, swish.* "You hear anything funny last night?"

I shook my head and went on watering.

"Damn so-and-a-who rang my front doorbell again last night. Rang it and ran away. You sure you didn't hear anything?"

I nodded. She looked hopeful. "You did?"

"No. I mean . . . Yes! I *didn't!*"

"What?"

"I DIDN'T HEAR ANYTHING!"

"Don't have to shout," she said. "I can hear perfectly well, if you'll just talk in a normal voice. Mutter like that, how can anyone hear you?"

I'd been discounting Mrs. Whelan's doorbell ringer for so long it gave me a start when I saw a real man on her veranda. I came around the corner of my house to put seed in my bird feeders and there he was, pushing a business card through her screen door. He was wearing a regimental tie and a three-piece suit, but I recognized him at once.

After he finished with Mrs. Whelan he slipped through the camellia hedge. "Been awhile, I know," he said, taking off his sunglasses. "Always meant to call."

I had to laugh: Trees had grown high since I'd seen him last but the heat in his off-center smile was the same. "You still into knobs and tubes?"

Grinning, he handed me his business card. It read: Robert "Robbie" Kester, Colonial Builders, Acquisitions. When I tried to give the card back, he waved it away. "How'd you like to sell this place? I was just telling Mrs. Whelan, if she sold to Colonial Builders, I'd see to it she got one of our condos rent-free, for the rest of her life."

"She's ninety-five!"

He raised his eyebrows. "Two bathrooms. Kitchen with everything: garbage disposal, two ovens, a microwave, dishwasher, trash compacter. Air conditioning in the summer, forced-air heat in the winter. Two-car garage—"

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"She hasn't driven a car since nineteen forty-four."

There wasn't a second's pause. Like a fly, Robbie could sketch corners in the air. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Something inside me stumbled and stopped dead. "No."

But Robbie went on as if he hadn't heard me. "Give you the same money as I'm offering her: $700,000—even though this isn't the corner lot. What I need, what I've got to have, is a parcel big enough for eighteen units. Help me with the old lady, and I'll see you get the premium on the deal."

"The what?"

"There's a premium of ten to twenty percent on top of your asking price if you can get Mrs. Whelan to sell along with you. Your end of the deal could come to as much as eight hundred forty thousand dollars."

Wonderful. And an apartment so tiny, so airless, all it would take is brass handles and I could be buried in it. While I was thinking, Robbie's mind made another left-hand turn. "She's nuts, you know. Ought to be in a home."

"She *is* in a home."

"You know what I mean. For her own protection."

"She's doing okay."

"Been nuts for a long time. Just didn't see it before. Thought she was ornery. Remember the fight I had with her over the wiring? She ever get it replaced? That old knob-and-tube stuff is a real fire hazard."

That summer Wendell and Earlene spent every Friday night attempting to convince Mrs. Whelan that it was time to sell her house. They sat out back in the old lady's warped gazebo and shouted at one another. Wendell and Earlene shouted because the old lady couldn't hear them if they didn't, and the old lady shouted because nothing made her angrier than the suggestion that she couldn't hear, unless it was the idea that she should sell her property.

"This is my property. *Mine,"* she shrieked. "No damn so-and-a-who is forcing me to give up what's mine. Who the hell do you think you are? Telling me what to do. As if you were the only one had a brain in his head. Talking to me—to *your own mother,* like she was nuts or something!"

"Oh God, Mama. All I said was—"

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"Well, I won't put up with it. How *dare* you talk to me like that after all I've done for you. Worked my fingers to the *bone!* Gave you everything. Everything!"

Earlene's baby voice slid under Mrs. Whelan's harangue, but it wasn't Mrs. Whelan she was talking to, but Wendell. "Wennn-dull," she said, "the problem isn't your mother's hearing, it's her *brain.*"

Wendell didn't say anything, but recognizing Earlene's intent, if not her meaning, the old lady stopped screaming at Wendell and rounded on Earlene. "You got something to say about me, young lady, you can say it to my face. Rude to be whispering to one another."

"Oh God," Wendell sighed.

"Nothing the matter with my hearing. Nothing the matter with me, if that damn so-and-a-who would stop ringing my doorbell in the middle of the night. He rings the doorbell and rings and rings, and when I get up to go see who it is, he's run away."

"Have you seen him, Mother Whelan?"

"Can't think of who it could be wants to talk to me at two in the morning."

Then Wendell spoke up. "Your neighbor never hears him, Mama. Why is that?"

"HAS ANYONE EVER SEEN HIM?" Earlene shouted.

For a shocked moment, it was quiet on their side of the fence and quiet on mine. I sucked the finger I'd just bloodied with my clippers and wished they'd left me out of it.

Mrs. Whelan rounded on Earlene. "Just who the hell do you think you are, yelling at me like that?"

"Isn't it . . . *strange,* that nobody but you has ever—"

Mrs. Whelan turned on her son. "You think I'm nuts? My own son calling me nuts?"

"No, Mama. Of course not." Wendell back-pedaled. "But you may be, well, *hearing* things."

"Swear to God, Wendell, if you don't shut up, I'll see my lawyer. Don't think I won't. Then we'll just see. Leave my property to anyone or anything I want to leave it to. *And it don't have to be you.*"

There was a long silence on the other side of the fence. Then Earlene spoke. "Would you like your ice cream now, Mother Whelan? It's Rocky Road."

"Huh?"

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"ICE CREAM, NOW?"

"Well, you don't have to shout!"

One night last March, Wendell woke me up pounding on his mother's front door. Mrs. Whelan had reported her phantom doorbell ringer so often the past month the police called Wendell, instead of sending a patrol car.

I couldn't sleep. I got my flashlight and went out to my garden to pick slugs (you can only get them at night). A half-hour later, I heard a thump and moan from Mrs. Whelan's side of the hedge. I flashed my light through and caught Wendell.

"Get that damn thing out of my eyes! Damn! I thought you were Mama's midnight doorbell ringer. What the hell are you doing out here this time of night?"

"You woke me up when you drove in."

Though he'd been in retirement for some years, Wendell could still make my heart turn over. I invited him in. Over a cup of tea and a slug of whiskey he told me what had happened.

"This time Mama said she got up to go to the bathroom and when she passed the living-room door she saw a stranger sitting at her drum table. She ran into the bedroom and pushed the sewing machine against her door and piled a chair on top of that."

"Poor lady."

Wendell's cup rattled in the saucer. "We're starting proceedings to have my mother declared incompetent. Earlene's been to see a lawyer."

"And her house?"

"Sell it."

I heard the clock ticking in the corner. "She's ninety-five, Wendell, can't you just wait?"

He gave a despairing smile. "They're going to send somebody out to talk to her; to make an evaluation. He might want to talk to you."

"No," I said.

"You wouldn't want her to hurt herself."

"Get her a companion."

"You think anybody could live with her? Could you?"

It was spring. In my iris bed, sharp little swords of green were coming up. I'd started that bed thirty years ago. I wanted to be here to see them come up and flower this April. And next spring,

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too. And the one after that. And all that stood between them and Colonial Builders' bulldozers was one demented little old lady.

Two weeks later, it rained and our sewer system backed up.

Quicker than you could say "quality of life," the remaining owners of single-family homes in our little beach town petitioned the city council demanding a limit to growth, a limit to the number of dwellings that could be put on one city lot. They were aided by a startling number of condo owners who were all for slow growth now it meant keeping other people out. And they won.

But the builders didn't exactly lose, either. "We still have ninety days," Robbie told me the next day. "Sell to us now—Now!—while we can still get a permit under the wire. You wait and the value of your property is gonna drop like a rock!"

I looked from Robbie to the vine at the edge of the veranda where the wisteria's drooping buds were a haze of violet. I knew what a bulldozer would do to my wisteria.

He offered me a clincher. "Mrs. Whelan is gonna sell."

"I don't think so."

"Won't be up to her. We've contacted the son and his wife."

"Earlene."

"She's for it. You can see why. With him retired and her struggling to make ends meet . . ." He smiled again but it didn't strike me the same as it once had. His teeth seemed longer.

Wendell and Earlene began visiting more and more frequently. Their visits were usually at night, so I didn't hear much of anything till they came out to their car.

"Wish you'd just accept it that she's nuts and go on from there," said Earlene.

"Go *where* from there?"

"Sell the house, Wendell—the property. Take it away from your mother—just take it!—and sell it while you can!"

"She doesn't want to."

"It's not like she was rational, you know." Earlene came around to the driver's side of their car, opening the door with that awkward, stiff-fingered gesture peculiar to women with long fingernails.

"You're going out tonight? Again?"

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"Yes, Wendell, I am. I'm not retired. I show people properties at their convenience, not mine."

"Haven't been home one night this week."

"One of us has to make some money."

The following morning, the day before the fire, Mrs. Whelan and I met out by the curb on the parkway, both of us hauling our bags of rubbish. We walked back down the drive together, Mrs. Whelan's tattered slippers *swish-swish-swishing* on the pavement.

"There's someone gets into my house in the night," she confided. "Makes noise. Plays loud music. I yell at him to stop making all that noise, but he keeps on. Bad last night."

I nodded. "I know."

"I keep the doors locked. Don't know how he gets in." Her face brightened. "You heard him?"

"I HEARD *YOU.*"

She looked confused. "Oh," she said.

Later on that morning, I heard hammering. When I went around my house to look, I saw her standing on her rusty lawn chair, swinging a ballpeen hammer, nailing shut the windows in her house. I was stunned. "You sure you want to do that?"

She went on hammering. She wasn't particularly good at it, but connecting once every four or five times was enough to do the job. She was concentrating so hard, she didn't even look up. I patted her shoulder and, leaning close to her ear, I gestured at her window. "What are you doing?"

She gave a nail angled into the window frame a last whack, driving it into the sill. "This'll keep 'im out," she muttered, "dirty so-and-a-who."

"How are you going to *breathe?*"

I called their home and got the answering machine. Wendell was out. Earlene could be reached at the office for Seaview Townhomes.

When I got there the office was closed for lunch, so I took the elevator up to look at the "decorator" penthouse on the top floor.

In the ads, Colonial Builders said the view from the terrace was "breathtaking," and it sure took mine. The sky. The ocean. And four floors below, a man in a three-piece suit giving a sheep-haired woman's buttocks a sneaky squeeze. When he got into

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his car, the woman blew him a kiss and waved bye-bye like a baby with both hands, her long red fingernails glinting in the sun.

Robbie knew Earlene all right. I stood there in that sterile, over-decorated penthouse and felt something like ants crawling up my spine. *She's for selling. You can see why. With him retired and her struggling to make ends meet.*

I walked back inside, and listened to the maid in the master suite, humming as she made the bed. When I asked her why sheets and pillowcases were needed in a model apartment, she laughed a little and shrugged.

While she was in the kitchen, I slipped into the master bedroom. I'd seen Earlene waving good-bye to Robbie. I knew what I was looking for.

On the way down in the elevator I thought about Mrs. Whelan's phantoms. Maybe one of them was real. *She ever get her wiring fixed? That old knob-and-tube wiring can be a real fire hazard.*

When I showed Earlene what I'd found, I expected denials, excuses, bluster. In fact, the moment I showed her what I'd found and told her where I'd found it, I regretted it. In the silence that followed, I wondered if I could be sued. She could have lost that fingernail in any number of perfectly legitimate ways. She was showing the place, wasn't she? It wasn't really proof of anything. But as I waited for her reaction, I discovered how much I had overestimated her. Earlene melted and ran like a cube of butter in a microwave.

I thought we were safe: Mrs. Whelan, my garden, and me. I thought Earlene's fear of what I knew was our guarantee of safety, but I was wrong.

The fire started around two the following morning. One moment it was a flicker, the next, an inferno. It roared and crackled and I watched in horror while flaming embers swarmed like bright bees into my sycamores.

Later, when the house was gone, firefighters removed a small body wrapped in black plastic and remorse opened up like a cavern in my soul.

A chatty fellow with a clipboard and badge showed up at my door that morning. He was full of talk, and stories, and smiles that never reached his eyes. Though a pall of gray ash lay over

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everything, I went through the motions of hospitality.

I told him I was out in my backyard picking slugs when the fire started.

"Picking what?"

"Slugs. Do a lot of damage if you don't keep them down. I don't poison them because of the birds." I could see he wasn't a gardener or a bird lover. "Go look! There's a coffee can full of them out on the service porch."

I heard rather than saw his reaction. But when he came back into the kitchen he had something else in his hand, holding it in two fingers under the head, instead of by the handle—a ballpeen hammer.

We looked at one another for a moment. His eyes seemed narrower and colder than before. The tea kettle howled and I turned off the heat. "I was going to tell you about that."

As I poured the water into the pot, I heard a door open at the back of the house and shuffling footsteps coming down the hall to the breakfast room; the *swish, swish, swish* of tattered old bedroom slippers on bare wood.

Mrs. Whelan's face was dark with soot, her hair—what there was of it—stood on end. She paused beside the built-in buffet. Then, drawing a twiglike forefinger along a surface gray with ash, she lifted it. "Look at this!" she said. "Will—you—just—look!"

I motioned her into a chair. She sat down muttering and I went to the sink to wash another cup and saucer. The investigator followed me. "Who is she? Who's that woman?"

"I was in my backyard when I saw a wavering light on Mrs. Whelan's kitchen blinds. Then the back door opened and I could see her silhouetted against it. Seconds later, the kitchen seemed to explode. When I found her, she'd fallen off the back steps and the kitchen was nothing but flames. I grabbed her and brought her over here. Then I called nine-one-one."

"And the hammer?"

"She was carrying it. I didn't see what was on the end of it till this morning."

The investigator looked at Mrs. Whelan, who was now using the sash of her robe to polish a clean space on the breakfast table. "Disgusting. Don't know how you can live like this."

The investigator drew a plastic sack from his pocket and slipped it over the head of the hammer. "She say anything to you, about what happened?"

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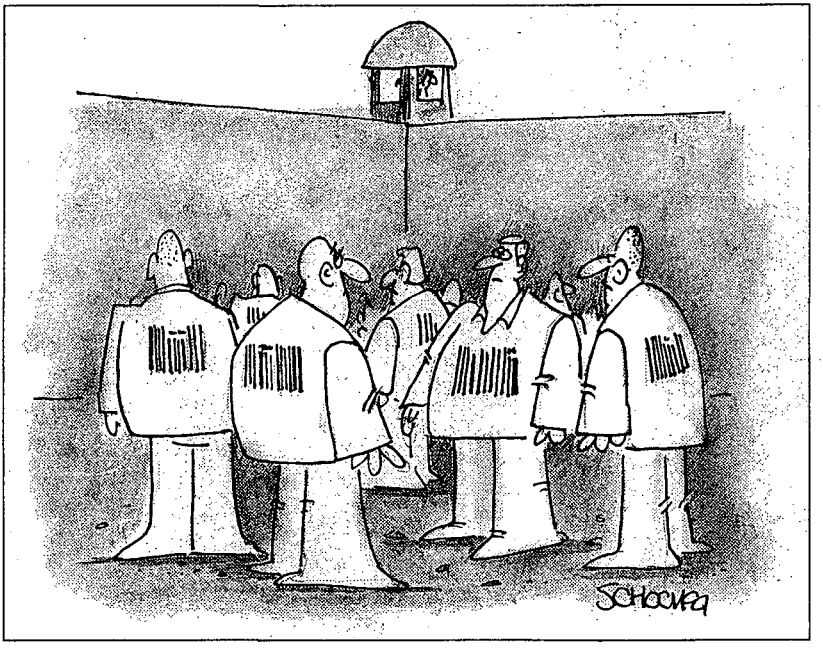
"Same as she's told anybody who would listen for the last few years. She said there was someone in her house, making noise, making a mess. This time she took care of him."

Only it wasn't a him. It was a her. Poor sheep-haired, sheep-witted Earlene. Even now I don't think she started the fire. I scared her so badly she went into Mrs. Whelan's house alone that night to try to undo whatever Robbie had set up. But she was too late, or too awkward. Or maybe her remaining fingernails got in the way.

Robbie was charged, but not with arson or attempted murder. My ex-lover with the off-center smile is serving time for bribing four of our seven zoning commissioners. Because of the slump in real estate, Wendell and I leased our parcel for a vest-pocket park. My sycamore now arches over a sandbox and the wisteria has begun to wind around a new gazebo with high, steeply pitched eaves.

Perfect for swallows. ●



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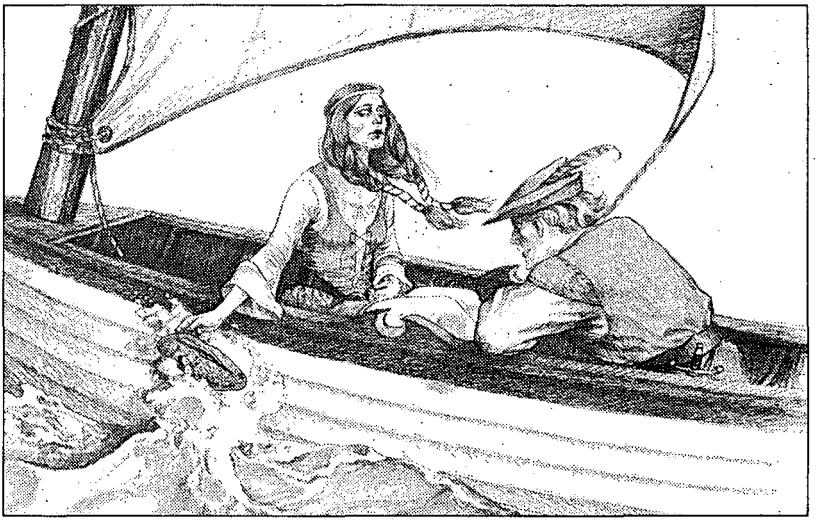

Art by Laurie Harden

A Loaf of Quicksilver

by Clayton Emery

"Rouse, rouse!" Pounding at the door shook the cottage. Moaning on the sea wind came the doleful cry. "A boat's come back empty! Rouse!"

Robin and Marian were off their pallets instantly—sleepy outlaws didn't live long—with bows in hand. Their host, the fisherman Peter, unbarred the door. Sea wind, cold and salty, swirled in their faces and made the fire in the hearth gutter.

"What's happening?" asked Sidony. A barrel-shaped woman with a face like a dried apple, she was bundled in wool with a scarf over her head. Five sleepy-eyed children clustered around. "Whose boat?"

"Gunther's! Both him and Yorg are missing!"

"Oh my!" The fishwife put a gnarled hand to her mouth. "And Lucy and Zerlina so young to be widows!"

Robin Hood shrugged on his quiver, an instinct when trouble portended. He and Marian were dressed alike, in tattered wool

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of Lincoln green, laced deerhide jerkins, and soft hats sporting spring feathers. The outlaw chieftain and his wife stepped outside the tiny cottage.

With food lean in the Greenwood and a long winter over, they'd taken a holiday of sorts, walked from Sherwood east and then north, followed a Roman road through Lincoln, across the Humber, to the high cliffs at Scarborough, which Marian had never seen. They'd dawdled on the way back, followed the coast dotted with black wrecks, out to buy dried herring for Lent and "to smell the salt air."

Like several other writers of *mystery historicals, including* Peter Tremayne (*EQMM*, May 1995), Clayton Emery also does work in the fantasy genre. This doesn't surprise us given the subject matter he has chosen for his mystery stories: crime-solving adventures of Robin Hood. Yet Mr. Emery has obviously been painstakingly accurate in providing historical detail for his stories, and he's given the characters a distinctive shape. ¶

They had salt air aplenty, for the wind never quit. It pulsed and blustered and boomed and tickled, never still. Sea and wind and clouds were half the world for tiny Wigby, sixteen cottages almost overwhelmed by wide Humber Bay, roiling with waves driven from the turbulent North Sea, called the German Sea hereabouts. Behind the village lay sandy dunes with grass atop, and a forest, The Wolds, like a fog bank in the distance. A long way to haul firewood, the outlaw thought.

Against a cloudy red-streaked sunrise, villagers clustered at the high-tide mark, an undulating wave of seaweed. Men and women were almost identical in salt- and scale-streaked smocks, shabby wool hose, and pitchy half-boots. Hats were tied under chins to confound the wind. Amidst the fisherfolk slumped two new widows, teary but resigned, as if they'd expected this day. Children clung to their skirts and stared at an empty dory.

As the fishing family and their guests straggled down the shingle, Sidony muttered, "It's their own fault. 'If two relatives

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go out in a boat, one will drown.' And sneaking out in the middle of the night."

"Sneaking out?" Marian listened close, for the local accent was guttural and garbled. The last phrase resembled "sneegin' gout."

"Aye. Gettin' a jump on the herrin'. You're not supposed to go ahead of the rest, t'ain't fair. You wait, pass your boat through the rope circle, get the blessing of the deacon. It's custom goes back forever. And they sailed under a full moon, too!"

The party squeezed in to examine the dory, floated in on the tide and hauled up from the surf, but there was little to see. The boat was a dozen feet long with a tombstone stern and flat bottom, broad-beamed and high-walled to ride blue water. Around the mast was a lateen sail of coarse yellowed linen. Nets were folded in heaps across the waist. A large rock in the bow served as anchor. The oars were missing while a worn boot had been left behind. Many villagers echoed Sidony's admonitions about tempting fate and taking advantage.

Robin Hood's keen eyes were busy. Peering, he handed Marian his bow and clambered over the gunwale, careful to tread on ribs and not the bottom planks. Still someone warned, "Not supposed to step in a boat ashore. S'bad luck." Robin rubbed his hand along the ribs, swirled his hand in the bilge slopping in the bottom. It might have been tinged red, but his calloused hand came away clean.

A toothless elder sighed and let go of the gunwale, then so did the others, as if letting go of the lost fishermen. "Enough grievin'. Tide's makin'. Time to get the fish in." Instinctively people scanned the wind and waves and sky, then turned to breakfast and ready their own boats lined along the strand.

Robin and Marian lingered, as did their hosts. The outlaw scanned the dory from stem to stern as if he'd buy it. He used his Irish knife to poke the outer hull, felt the sea moss and barnacles. Then he stood back stroking his beard. Marian knew that sign: His curiosity was piqued.

They walked with Peter's family back to the cottage for chowder and ale. Sidony muttered, "Knew it would happen some day. I'm just surprised it took this long."

"What?" asked Robin and Marian together.

The fisherfolk looked at them, still unsure of their status. These were the famous outlaws of Sherwood Forest, they knew, and supposedly lords. They'd descended on Wigby unexpectedly,

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seeking lodging and paying in silver. Their hosts were unsure how to address them, but fishermen were a hard-headed lot who feared only God and storms. Husband and wife let the silence drag to underline their independence. Robin added, "Please. We're strangers hereabouts. Why are you not surprised?"

Peter remained silent, let his wife talk for both. "Well . . . The good Lord knows we lose enough men to plain accidents. There's more ways to die on the swan's road. Strike a rock, or a whale, a rogue wave, a sea serpent. But if anyone went hunting grief it was Gunther and Yorg. They were brothers and forever fighting. They even fought over who owned that boat when both helped build it. So squabbling's been the death of them, I'd say."

The outlaw nodded absently. " 'Most of our troubles we bring on ourselves.' "

The family stamped up the shingle. Marian lagged behind. "You're pensive, Rob. What's your guess?"

Robin turned and scanned the sea. "I'm a simple man given to simple explanations. There's no sign the boat struck anything: no planks stove in, no barnacles scraped off, the moss intact all over. The boat might've pitched them overboard, but the nets are still folded neat. And there's that boot."

"Yes . . . ?"

"I don't know . . . It's rare that ghosts or selkies or serpents pluck a man into the sea. Men bear enough evil we needn't blame the fays for murder."

"And . . . ?"

"Perhaps nothing." Robin shrugged. "I don't wish to speak ill of the dead, especially newly dead. I don't need ghosts wafting over the waves for me."

Marian stared at the gray roiling sea. The breeze blew dark hair around her face and she combed it back. "Yes, let's curb our tongues."

After a subdued Mass and blessing of the fleet, and passing each boat through a rope circle, Wigby went fishing. And Robin Hood went with them.

He worked with Peter, who'd lost his eldest son in a storm the year before. Next eldest, too young to be married, was a squint-eyed, serious-faced girl of fourteen named Madge.

Robin rowed, for he liked the feel of the waves under the wooden blades, while Peter manned the tiller and sheets for the

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triangular sail. Madge watched from the bow. Other boats from Wigby had put out, a dozen of them, and farther off bobbed boats from other villages and towns: Aldbrough, Patrington, Hedon, Grimsby. Peter occasionally sheared by another boat, yelled a welcome or a friendly insult, asked for news, passed on gossip. Yet no one from Wigby mentioned that two brothers were drowned and missing, that two families had been wiped out.

After a time, Madge reported this spot might do. Robin glanced over the side and gasped.

The boat floated on a sea of silver backs.

Herring jammed the water nose to tail, tight-packed as if already in the barrel. Alike as leaves on a tree, all were a foot long, mouths open and eyes like jet targets.

With no sign of elation, Peter donned an oilskin apron and unfolded the nets with an easy grace. Robin helped, so clumsy he almost pitched overboard. Madge took the tiller and steered a lazy circle. In minutes Robin felt the boat slow as the nets dragged. Peter grunted to Madge, snapped at Robin, then tilted inwards a tiny corner of a net.

A silvery cascade washed the bottom of the boat. Fish boiled and roiled and flopped and flapped, some so hard they flipped over the gunwale back to their haven. In two hours of back-breaking, fingernail-ripping, clothes-soaking labor, the tiny crew made four more passes, hauling in nets until the gunwales were awash and Robin Hood was knee-deep in fish.

"S'enough," said Peter. He and Robin sat near the bow to keep the nose down and prevent the stern from foundering, while Madge turned her cheek to the wind and aimed for home.

Yet the fisherman took no ease, but honed a knife on a sea stone, handed it to Robin with a few terse instructions. Robin Hood knew better how to dress deer than clean fish, but managed to behead and gut, yet keep the fillet intact along the spine for hanging, all without losing fingers.

Always curious, Robin looked to expand his knowledge. "How many trips will you make today, Peter?"

Hands busy, the fisherman glanced instinctively at the sky. Gulls followed them, soaring and banking, crashing into the water after fish offal. "As many as God gives us. While the herring are here, we work, for they'll be gone soon enough."

"Oh? Why so?"

But the fisherman just shrugged and wouldn't answer.

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Robin sought another topic. Examining the fish he cut, he found them not all the same. "Why are they different?" He tried to hide the chattering of his teeth. Though both were just as wet, the fisherman and his daughter gave no sign of being chilled. They ate slices of raw fish to keep their body heat up.

The man flipped a butterfly fillet into a wicker basket. "They ain't. They're all herrin'." At the stern, Madge laughed quietly.

Robin held up a fish in either hand, solid writhing muscles coated with scales and slime. Both were the same length, but one was slim as a snake while the other was fat and humpbacked. "But they ain't the same. These are—"

Clearly galled by his free help, the fisherman stopped cleaning to point with his knife. "The skinny one's a pilchard. The fat one is a gizzard shad; he's got a fat gizzard, see? That'n's 'n alewife, blessed by Saint Peter. See his fingerprints down his ribs? And here." He pinched a fish by its dorsal fin. "If 't hangs straight, it's a herrin'. If 't hangs tail down, it's a pilchard. Nose down is a sprat—little and spratty, see? But hell, man, if they come to shore in herrin' season, they're herrin'. Like women—they all taste the same in the dark."

Robin chuckled at his ignorance and flayed with slimy hands, one fish to every five of Peter's. He kept the man talking. "Why did you say the fish would be gone soon? I thought herring season lasted a full moon."

"Not now it won't. 'Herrin' dislike a quarrel,' they say. Now that blood's been spilt, they'll vanish." He nodded grimly over the side where the wind ripped whitecaps and sent spume flying. "This be all we'll see this year. It's a hungry winter we'll 've."

Robin didn't disagree, but the gray waves shone with fish deep as he could see. He failed to understand how they could disappear overnight. Shaking his head, he grabbed another fish. It squirted through numb hands and kissed him on the mouth.

While her husband toiled at sea, Marian helped on the strand. Women and girls rolled out barrels of salt dried in salt pans during the winter, broached them, and crushed the white clumps with wooden mallets. Girls returned from the woods with brush hooks and saplings to repair the yards-long drying racks. Then the first boats arrived, and women toted the fillets and fish in wicker baskets and set to with sharp knives at long plank tables.

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They worked and sang and joked and gossiped of wedding plans. It was common for betrothed to marry after the herring season, when hands were idle and dirty weather kept folk home. "Weddings bring stormy weather," Marian was told a dozen times. Brides chattered about plans for improving homes and husbands while the matrons shook their heads. Marian noted some needed little advice, for their bellies were swollen from wintertime assignations.

Unmarried girls took time to dig fat from under the backbone of a proper herring, a glob of gooey silver, and hurl it against a hut wall. If it stuck upright, they were teased, their husband would be upright and true, but if the fat clung crooked, so would their husbands prove false.

The only ones quiet were Lucy and Zerlina, the new widows. They grieved but worked, for no one stood idle while the herring ran.

Yet one did. As Marian returned from the privy, she noted a dark figure silhouetted against the gray sky. The woman walked the bushy cliffs and lumpy headlands north of the village, where the tide smashed to spray on rocks.

Marian stood by Sidony, grabbed a fish and a knife, set to slicing. She nodded south. "Who's that? Why doesn't she help?"

Sidony answered without looking. "That'd be Mornat. She don't associate."

"Mornat?" said Marian. "What a queer name. What does it mean?"

" 'S'a queer woman. The priest named her after cutting her from her dead mother. It means 'living from the dead' or somewhat. A posthumous child. So she has the second sight, and can heal with her touch."

Marian touched up a blade, sliced off the hundredth staring head of the day. Her calloused hands were pruney and blue. "Why doesn't she associate?"

"She's queer, is all. We go to her when we need potions and such. The rest of the time she's off wandering the cliffs and sea caves, or walking to Hull for her nostrums. We don't keep track of her comings and goings. She doesn't like us. She's touched. And today she'll be worse than ever."

Marian made silence her question.

"Mornat set her cap for—" she wouldn't say the name, so Marian knew it must be one of the drowned brothers—"one who's

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left us for a better place. When she turned thirteen, she washed her shift in south-running water, turned it wrong-side out, and hung it before the fire, as girls will, you know. They say the likeness of—him who's not with us—came into her hut and turned the shift right-side out. Mornat followed him everywhere then, and let him take liberties up on the cliffs in the grass, and told everyone they were to marry in spring. But it didn't happen, for he married Lucy over there and never spoke to Mornat again."

So, thought Marian, it was the elder brother, Gunther, that Mornat had fancied. "The poor thing. It must have torn her heart from her bosom."

"If she has a heart," Sidony sniped. "Them touched with the sight don't live entirely in this world. And good enough, I say."

More boats plowed the surf and disgorged heaping baskets of fish. Men and boys took warmed watered cider and bread and chowder, then returned to the waves. Robin, his beard flecked with scales, gave Marian a quick kiss before driving his oars through the surf once more.

All day they worked. Drying racks were hung with fillets that danced and dripped in the sea wind. More were packed in salt. When the group flagged, one woman began a song so old it was another tongue and no one knew the words, yet every woman sang along, timing the beat to the rhythm of her hands. As the sun set, old men built driftwood fires. Girls threaded fillets onto whittled sticks and propped the dripping bundles on the drying racks higher than a dog could jump. Boys lugged baskets of guts to wash out on the evening tide as gulls squawked at their feet.

When it was too dark to fish even by torchlight, the men beached the boats and helped clean and thread before snatching a few hours' sleep and setting out at dawn to fetch more fish.

Robin and Marian worked together, cutting themselves often now, salt stinging the gashes. At one point in the long night, Marian asked her husband, "Well, Rob? Are you ready to eschew outlawry and take up fishing instead?"

Robin sliced, cursed as he shaved fine bones. "Nay, never. Not in this life or any other. You'd have to be daft to go fishing, cracked as a coal miner. It's safer riding into battle against Saracens than going head-to-head with the North Sea in a cockleshell. It's no wonder these lot are so superstitious, putting their lives in the hands of God with every scull."

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Marian agreed. "I never saw such a lot for queer beliefs."

"I thought we were bad in Sherwood, what with crossing streams with the right foot foremost and never venturing into caves without making the sign of the cross and making sure the light of a full moon never falls on your face: sensible things. But these fisherfolk! Not once today did anyone mention two brothers had drowned for fear of provoking their ghosts. And I was told more how not to fish than to fish. Never point at a boat with your finger, use your whole hand. Never call the salmon by its name, call it the 'red fish' instead. Never mention rats or mice while baiting hooks or laying the nets. By Saint Dunstan, what's rats and mice got to do with baiting?"

Marian only shook her head. Oddly, her thoughts flickered to the ostracized Mornat, alone and wind-blown as she walked the cliffs, like some widow who had never known a husband.

As the eternal night dragged and breath frosted, both outlaws grew sick of the bloody-salty-seaweedy smell of flayed fish. The villagers were exhausted yet worked with a will, glad the time of plenty had finally arrived after the long dark winter.

Three days they toiled thus, a blur of dying fish and chilled blood and raw, chapped, bleeding hands, snatching sleep and food. By late in the third day, no one sang or laughed. Work was a soul-numbing chore, and only future survival kept everyone hauling in nets and flaying fish.

As the sun peeked over the horizon on the fourth day, the women braced at their plank tables, knives sharp and ready, not talking. Only the sough of the constant wind and crackle of fires was heard.

It got quieter when the boats did not return for hour after hour. Women left tables to warm at the fires, or found other chores neglected over the past frenzied days.

Finally three boats came in, riding high, the fishermen's faces long, and the women guessed. The men splashed over the sides and beached the boats. They lifted out two or three baskets of odd fish and a few herring.

An old man ran his tongue over toothless gums, husked, "They're gone, ain't they? It's happened. The curse. Blood's been spilt and the herrin've vanished."

More boats beached. With empty hearts and idle hands, villagers stumbled to their cottages to sleep. There was no more work, no more herring to flay and dry, nothing extra to trade.

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Come the depths of winter, they'd go hungry.

"It's the witch's done it. Witches are the bane of us. Do more harm than good."

Next morning, Peter's family sat around a guttering fire in the tiny cottage. They ate meager portions of chowder, already rationing, and stared at the driftwood fire, winking blue and green from burning salt.

"Look out on Lewis there," said Sidony. "One time, starvin' times, a woman was 'bout to hurl herself into the sea. But a magic cow appeared, white she was, a beauty. Told her to fetch her milking pail. Everyone in Callinish could milk her every night long's they took but one pail. Then an old witch tried to milk her into a sieve. She roared once like a lion and disappeared. No more milk after that. And they say she become the Dun Cow of Dunchurch, tearing up the countryside until Guy of Warwick killed 'er. And you know 'hat's true, because one of her ribs is in a chapel dedicated to Guy in Warwickshire.

"Nothing's good for a witch but to hang her familiar, then cut crosses in her body to let the bad blood out. There was one village—I ain't saying which one, but it's near here—had its crops blighted. A witch bred big toads and hitched 'em to little plows, sent 'em across the fields and poisoned the soil. They had to move away and never came back.

"T'was probably Mornat done in—them that's missin'."

Marian disliked arguing with a host, but could not let this last comment pass. "How could one small woman harm two brawny seamen? I've seen the muscles on your menfolk. Any one of them could wrestle Little John, Cumberland-style, and take one bout out of three. And how could she get into their boat? You'll blame the poor woman for shooting stars next."

Sidony only looked at the fire. "There's ways o' working evil. There's ways."

Robin Hood rubbed his brow with a hunk of lard where the wind had streaked it with salt. "Is there some way to lift the blood curse? That would bring the herring back?"

Sidony and Marian both frowned in thought. Finally the fishwife said, "Might be possible. I've heard tell if you could raise the bodies and give 'em a Christian burial, lay their—" she skipped the word "ghosts"—"the herring *might* come back. But it's been three days now and they haven't come ashore."

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Everyone knew what she meant. Lungs full of water, a drowned body sank at first. But after three days, gases from corruption bloated the body and raised it. Yet neither brother had floated ashore, though the wind stayed in the northeast.

Marian pondered. "Perhaps we could float a loaf. But would anyone have quicksilver?"

The fishwife stared at the fire. "Aye, we might. T'would comfort the widows, too. . . . Mornat would have quicksilver. She uses it in potions."

Without further ado, Sidony left the cottage, Marian following. They stopped at a house where Sidony borrowed a fresh loaf of dark rye bread. The goodwife guessed its intention, but said nothing. So little needed be said in this village, Marian noted, as if everyone's mind lay open.

Sidony plodded towards the farthest cottage, removed from the rest, and Marian nodded again. A wise woman, a witch, was shunned but tolerated because she was needed.

The young woman who answered the knock seemed in need of healing herself. Thin as the railbirds that piped along the shore, Mornat was tall with skin boiled red—far more red than chapped cheeks. Her mouth pouted, lips puffed out, and her breath stank like a cesspit. Taciturn and curt, Mornat declined to look in Marian's eyes. "Yes? What is it?" Her voice quavered, and she wiped away drool with a shaky hand. She salivated like a hungry dog, and Marian wondered why.

"Good Maid Mornat," Marian suppressed distaste at the sinister name, "we wondered if you might spare some quicksilver. I can pay in true silver."

Mornat's answer was a short nod to enter. She walked, Marian noted, gracelessly, straight up and down like a man.

The windowless cottage was tiny and, lacking a man's hand, drafty. The fire guttered and backblew, a sign the chimney was stacked wrong or clogged with soot. There was a table and single stool, a messy bed, jars and crocks for nostrums, and little else. Fresh seaweed lay on the hearth, a charm against house fires.

Mornat also did not question their begging quicksilver. She reached under the table and drew out a hollowed stump packed with chunky white clay. Calomel, Marian knew, fetched from Hamburg. She recalled Mornat often walked to Kingston Upon Hull down the coast. There'd be ships from the Continent there.

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Mornat broke the white clay into an iron spider with a spoon and propped it in the fire to roast it. As she waited for the quicksilver to ooze from the clay, Mornat wafted her hand through the sweetish fumes and inhaled deeply. To Marian's curious glance, she supplied, "The breath of quicksilver is good for the lungs." Yet she coughed.

Marian nodded, but other thoughts flickered through her head. One Merry Man, Gilbert of the White Hand, had been a prisoner in the Holy Land and learned medicine from the Saracens. Greeks and Persians believed quicksilver touched by the god Mercury: An alchemist fathoming its secret might gain immortality. Yet Marian had doubts, for Mornat looked sick, for all she was strong and intelligent and composed. Pity welled in her breast, but she suspected any kindness would only be rebuffed.

Eventually, the witch lifted the pan away. Amidst the burned clay skittered globs of quicksilver. This fractious metal, Marian knew, over time hardened into true silver, also found in Germany.

With her Irish knife, Marian slit the top of the bread. Tipping the pan, Mornat dribbled in the quicksilver. Marian mashed the crust to seal in the metal.

Giving Mornat silver pennies, Marian said, "Our thanks. If this aids in locating the missing men—"

"T'will mean naught to me," Mornat interrupted. She stared from deep-sunk pouchy blue eyes. "Good day."

Peter and Robin dragged the dory to the surf as a crowd watched. A stout man named Vamond brought a proper anchor, the only one in the village, a four-pronged iron hook. Marian handed her husband the metal-laden loaf.

"Where shall we float it?" he asked.

Peter said, "I know."

Men helped launch the boat. Robin rowed, Vamond steered, and Peter in the bow shielded the precious loaf from spray.

Peter directed them north by east, marking a low-breasted hill. A quarter-mile from the rocky shore, where the boom of surf was loud, he called, "Gunther and Yorg often fished off Turk's Head here. Thought it was lucky."

So saying, he leaned over the bow and laid the loaf on the waves. Robin shipped his oars, and all three men stood, sway-hipped, to see what the bread would do.

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At first it only bobbed up and down. Peter ordered Robin to back water to reduce drag. Again they watched.

Vamond gasped. Robin felt hairs prickle along his arms.

As if towed by an underwater string, the bread moved towards shore. It bobbed up one side of a wave, crested, slid down, clearly moving towards land.

Not daring to speak, Peter signaled. Blades feathering the water, Robin rowed after the bread.

Row, pause, row, pause, row. They followed the waterlogged loaf for a furlong, close enough to shore to feel the boat tremble as green-gray waves exploded against seaweedy rocks. Robin noted dimples and cracks in the cliffs, the waves tortured them so. From the heights, gulls launched themselves at the boat, anticipating trash. Spooked already, Robin shuddered. The birds' cries were so mournful, like lost souls; the voices of the drowned, seafarers claimed . . .

"It's sinking!" Vamond yelped.

"It's sunk!" bawled Peter over the boom of surf. "Row up to it! Get the grapnel!"

Robin fought to keep the dory on the invisible sunken mark as the fishermen tangled rope and anchor in their excitement. Staring holes in the water, Peter finally lowered the grapnel straight down, Vamond feeding out. When the line bobbed slack, he'd hit bottom. Carefully, Peter swirled the rope, snapped it to make the anchor hop. Muttering, he told of thumping rocks, empty shells, a sand bar, more rocks. Still dredging, he ordered Robin to scull closer to shore.

Finally the anchor snagged and both fishermen groaned, for the drag on the rope told what it was. Robin steadied the oars and his stomach.

The men had no need to pull hard, for corruption had done its work. With a bubble and hiss and belch, a missing fisherman bobbed to the surface for the last time.

It took all three to haul the cold, clammy corpse aboard. Each man prayed aloud.

"Saint Peter protect us," breathed Peter. "It's Yorg. He had blond hair. Gunther was dark."

The hair was handy, for there was little else to identify the man. The body was naked, rough seas having stripped its

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clothes, and bloated twice normal size. Fish and crabs had chewed round its features.

Still, Robin Hood forced himself to squat and look. He'd seen worse, he affirmed, though not while pitching in a boat that reeked of dead fish and dead men. Grimly, he examined the remains as the fishermen set sail to veer from shore.

"You shouldn't defile the body," warned Peter.

"God values probity above propriety," Robin answered vaguely. Rolling Yorg over, he found the scalp cut cleanly, a flap of skin eaten away. The skull underneath was dented. The outlaw grunted. He'd seen enough open wounds to know living bone scratched easily.

"I don't understand," Vamond muttered. "How does the bread *know* where a body's sunk?"

"The quicksilver steers to the blood," Peter offered, "like an iron needle floated on water points north."

"More likely," suggested Robin as he poked, "the loaf is small enough to follow the strongest current. Weighted down, it floats like a body and stops in slack water, then just sinks on its own. . . . Unless I'm daft, this man was struck from behind. . . . But with what? . . . "

Immediately he knew, for the answer dug into his back: the shipped oars. He recalled both oars missing from Gunther's dory. And the bilge had been tinged red.

Peter shook his head as he took the tiller. "No surprise. They fought their lives long as only brothers can. And Gunther had a temper. So for him to cosh Yorg with an oar in a blind rage . . . "

Robin Hood cast about the gray roiling waves. "Where's Gunther then?"

"Where indeed?" asked Marian.

Robin shrugged. He walked the strand with Marian, glad to be off the water now he'd seen what it could do. Far behind, the village held a Mass for Yorg. The outlaws left them to it: Rather than weep and pray, they wanted to talk and think.

"Perhaps," mused Robin, "Gunther did fly into a rage, killed his brother, then threw himself after? Men with tempers are often mad turn and turn about."

Marian touched her little finger to her mouth. "Could someone *else* have killed *both?*"

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"Who?" asked Robin. *"I* couldn't kill two fishermen with a sword, they're so tough and strong. . . . "

"He was struck from behind. A child could do that."

". . . Yorg was ready to come up: One tug freed him. Gunther should have washed up by now."

"Unless he went out to sea."

"Not with this wind. It'd peel the bark off a tree." Robin had tied his hat cord under his chin. "Wait . . . What if Gunther's not a body?"

"Eh?"

Robin froze in his tracks. "If we don't have his body, when by all rights we should, maybe he's not—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! The gulls!"

Marian glanced overhead, saw only tiny black-tipped terns. "What gulls?"

"Come on!" Robin snatched her hand and dragged her stumbling down the strand.

"Are you sure you're not just showing off?" Marian asked.

Robin took Peter's dory without asking permission. He and Marian manhandled it to the surf, then Robin grabbed his wife by the waist and heaved her aboard, pushed off, hopped belly-down over the gunwale. Rowing would take too long, he claimed, so he raised the sail and set the sheets as best he could. The sail luffed, flapping, but they steered in the right direction, the sharp prow slicing the waves, the bluff beam riding comfortably up and down.

"Will you *please* tell me what we're hunting?"

Robin told her. Afterwards, she was silent, straining to hear over the wind.

Off Turk's Head, the boat pitched as waves steepened near the rocks. Robin dumped the sail in a heap and grabbed the oars. He rowed closer to shore than last time. Marian watched waves boom and spume explode. "Rob, are you sure—"

"Hush and listen!" He ceased the creaking of oars. They bobbed, the rocks coming closer, the booming louder, listening until their ears rang.

Impatient, Robin shipped oars, braced his back against the mast, cupped his hands, and bellowed, "Hellooooooo!"

Listening. Slap of water under the prow. A warbling keen of disturbed gulls. The smash of surf.

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Then, very faint, "Hellllll . . . "

"An echo!" bleated Marian.

"No! Hush! Hellooooooooooo!"

Fainter. "Hellllllpppp!"

Robin scanned the cliffside, head wagging. "Whence came it, Marian?"

The Vixen of Sherwood marked the rocks. A shoulder of cliff jutted like an upright axe blade. "I think there!"

"Methinks also! Hang on!"

"Rob!" Marian scrooched her bottom in the tiny seat at the prow, clung to the gunwales with white knuckles. "What are you *doing?*"

"Hang on!" he roared. Craning his head around, hauling with mighty sinews, Robin rowed for a gap in the rocks no wider than the dory's ribs.

"Robbbbbb-iiiiinnnnn!"

A steepening wave curled around their stern like a giant hand and hurled them towards shore. Kept arrow-straight by the outlaw's rowing, the dory lifted high, hung just under the breaking crest of the huge wave, and—

Marian screamed and covered her eyes.

—*crashed* down into the gap and stuck fast.

Waves clawed and sucked at the boat's strakes, but couldn't dislodge it, so gushed over the gunwales instead. Marian yelped, but her husband hoicked her from her perch, hugged her around the waist, and jumped.

They plunged breast-high. The swirling salty chill made them gasp. Robin Hood fought for footing on shifting pebbles and slime. Straining against the undertow, he broke clear, trotted onto the narrow shingle, plunked his wife down with a grin.

Wet to her bosom, Marian could only gasp and nod at his brilliance. Robin jerked a shaking thumb towards the craggy cliff. "Wh-wh-wh-which?"

Marian couldn't talk, couldn't even point, so she led the way. The bright spring wind cut like the whips of Satan's imps.

Shuffling across rocks polished smooth by the pounding tide, they clung to the cliffside and crept towards the promontory, which rose before them like an upthrust knife blade. At half-tide, the surf swirled around their knees, sucked at their feet, tried to trip them again and again. Timing slack water, Marian, then Robin, zipped around the corner.

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There, washed by waves, was a cave mouth not waist high. Marian, in front, saw daylight wink on swirling water inside. Watching the waves, with Robin bracing her waist, Marian scrooched inside the cave. After the next wave burst around his legs, Robin slid after her.

Inside was a chamber big as a cottage. Daylight spilled through a grass-edged hole at the top of the cave. A dirt slide angled down to a natural rock ledge just above their heads.

On the ledge lay a fisherman.

His face was pinched with hunger and cold, his clothes sopping. A huge scab marked the back of his head, and his right leg jutted at an odd angle.

But he was alive, staring with haunted eyes.

"Gunther," said Robin, "we've come to take you home."

The fisherman began to cry.

Robin offered Marian ten fingers up to the ledge. "You know more of healing than I. Tend him. I'll see if the boat's lifted loose on the tide. We'll need it to get him home, otherwise I'll have to carry him the long way 'round."

Marian took the boot-up, knelt beside Gunther. The fisherman had expended the last of his strength shouting for help. As he swooned, Marian checked for damage, tried to figure how to splint his leg for transporting.

Robin Hood crouched at the cave mouth, timed the incoming waves—higher now—crabbed through the hole, quickly grabbed the cliff, and inched back. He found the boat stuck fast, half-swamped. Foam churned along the port strakes: He'd stove them beaching. He wasn't sure he could have rowed the dory out against the tide anyway. Better he walked the bluffs with the wounded man on his back while Marian ran ahead for help.

Rising tide crashed about him. Fighting for footing, Robin would have been sucked away by the undertow if not for steely fingers on the cliff face. The cave mouth was almost drowned, and he had to hold his breath and half-submerge to claw inside. Icy water almost stopped his heart.

Inside, gasping, blinded by seawater, he looked up at his wife and the fisherman. Gunther had blacked out, and Marian tussled to bind his legs together with rags.

Above them stood a third figure.

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Dark-clad, wind-whipped, the woman loomed over the unsuspecting Marian, a knife held high.

"Marian!"

The Vixen of Sherwood looked down, saw her husband's expression, glanced behind—

—and jerked aside as the knife slashed down at her back.

Marian shrieked as Mornat's cold blade sheared her deerhide jerkin and wool skirt and kissed her ribs. The madwoman hurled the knife high again.

Robin had no bow to shoot, no rock to pitch, so he threw his big Irish knife. His famous aim held true. The weapon cartwheeled, spanked flat against Mornat's breast, hard enough to rock her.

Marian reared half-erect on the narrow ledge. Unable to turn, she slammed her elbow into the woman's brisket.

Arms flailing, the murderess toppled from the ledge backwards.

Marian and Mornat screamed together, until the madwoman's head struck the rock wall.

"She slid down that chimney hole, got behind me. I didn't hear her for surf noise," Marian hissed as Robin wrapped a crude bandage around her naked ribs.

"She must have seen us from shore. She was always walking the bluffs."

"Aye, alone," said Marian. "Gunther told me a little. Mornat was always pestering him. That night, while the men were readying their boat for the herring, she startled them in the dark. Furious, they told her to bugger off. She struck both from behind with an oar. She killed Yorg and stunned Gunther, beat him and broke his leg, then tumbled them in the boat and pushed out. Yorg she tipped overboard. Gunther she hid in this sea cave. She fed him potions to make him love her."

"The strength of the mad," Robin muttered.

It took awhile, but Robin eventually boosted Marian through the chimney hole, then Gunther. Marian helped hoist, gasping with pain from her burning ribs.

Dead Mornat they left to the sea for now.

Grunting, Robin shifted the fisherman across his brawny shoulders. From the top of Turk's Head they saw distant Wigby like a colony of hermit crabs. They started walking through the bent yellow grass.

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"T'was some poison she mucked with, is my guess. It drove her mad," Robin huffed. When his wife didn't answer, he glanced over. "Marian, you're crying!"

"Yes, I'm crying!" Marian snapped. "You men! Quick to blame the moon and stars for your own faults! It wasn't quicksilver killed that poor woman! She was cursed before she was born! Cut from her dead mother, christened with that horrid name—'The living from the dead'!—so she's reminded of it every time someone speaks to her! And none would, for she was ostracized like a leper! Begged to heal all and sundry, then shunned for fear of ghosts or contamination or plain spite. Growing up without a mother, never learning a girl's graces and arts. Never to marry, never to know love! Suffering in silence while the girls chatter of wedding plans, knowing she'd never be a bride! It wasn't anything earthly killed that girl, it was lack of love!"

She sobbed now, chilled and wounded. Robin shifted his burden to catch her hand. "Don't cry, Marian. I hate to see you cry."

"Don't touch me! I need to cry! No one ever cried for that poor, lonely, love-starved creature, so it's time someone did, if only a stranger!"

Robin clucked his tongue, saved his breath for walking. Together they trudged along the bluff.

The sea wind pushed them along. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 53

"Of course Mr. Potter was able to find his way out of the woods," the policeman told Trumbull. "He's here for a Scoutmaster convention. Everyone invited had to show an Eagle Scout Badge."

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ONCE BURNED-TWICE SHY

by John Dobbyn

"Why do you need a criminal lawyer in the first place?"

The words boomed out of the voice box of the toughest old war-horse that ever bestrode the pit of the Suffolk Superior Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Alexis Devlin could do laser surgery on the slightest prevarication of a witness from twenty paces across a courtroom, and turn around and plead a jury into tears at the plight of a man who had axed both parents, on the grounds that he was an orphan.

That's an old lawyer's line, but I've seen him do substantially that. As a third-year associate with the redoubtable firm of Bilson, Dawes, Lethbridge & Sykes, fortune had paired me as trial assistant to the old badger on several previous criminal trials, in the course of which I had progressed from abject fear of the man, through awe, to my current stage of unabashed hero-worship.

When I walked into his corner office, Mr. Devlin's 6'1", 250-pound frame, impeccably draped in a blue serge Hart, Schaffner, and Marx, was leaning forward against the back of his desk chair. His eyes never broke lock with those of the thirtyish Brooks Brothers specimen in the chair in front of him. The younger man exuded the image of self-conscious perfection, as if someone had just taken him out of cellophane.

John Dobbyn's sleuthing team, lawyers Devlin and Knight, are back in a new adventure that has more to do with pre-trial maneuvers than courtroom skirmishes. Mr. Dobbyn, who teaches law at Villanova University, has recently completed a Devlin/Knight novel. The series promises to be a success, for the interaction between the two characters, especially Knight's veneration for the old war-horse Devlin, is catching. ✝

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Mr. Devlin shot a quick nod at the chair beside him, which I chose to interpret as signifying, "Good morning, Michael. Thank you for honoring us with your presence. Please make yourself comfortable."

I did.

"I didn't hear you, Mr. O'Connor. Why do you think you need a criminal lawyer?"

"Because I'm about to be indicted for murder."

"Whose?"

"Ellen Kennedy Chase."

Mr. Devlin swung the chair around and dropped into it.

"You're a little late. That position's been filled."

Mr. Devlin took it quietly, but the name Ellen Kennedy Chase brought me up ten degrees straighter. For three months, the *Globe* had reserved four to five inches on the front page for every new detail in the prosecution of an insurance salesman, Matthew Reingold, for murder one—to wit, the slicing of the throat of a twenty-six-year-old distant member of the clan from which she took her middle name. The mere mention of the victim called back news accounts of gore spread through her Beacon Hill apartment.

"I know, Mr. Devlin. The Reingold trial's been on for three days."

"What makes you think the D.A.'s going to change horses?"

"Because I did it."

As an attention-getter, it worked. Mr. Devlin was now straddling his desk pad with both elbows.

"Are you saying you want to turn yourself in, plead guilty?"

"Half right, Mr. Devlin. I'm willing to turn myself in, with your help, but I'll plead not guilty. I want a trial. I know your reputation. You can get me out of this."

Mr. Devlin pushed back. I could sense the bristle.

"Two things I'm not, Mr. O'Connor. I'm not a magician, and I'm not a shyster. Does that interfere with your plans?"

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Devlin. I'm not looking for anything unethical from you. I just want a full trial and the best defense I can get."

"I'll give you every inch of that and not an inch more."

"Agreed."

While the ground rules were being set, I was spinning through the accounts I'd followed since the case began six months before.

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Ellen Kennedy Chase had gone through upper-level schools, the last of which was Radcliffe. She had an unfortunate short-lived marriage to someone abusive and went to work at Massachusetts General Hospital in some administrative capacity.

She was found one Tuesday morning by the cleaning woman in her apartment in the safe, smart section that backs up the State House, called Beacon Hill. The cause of death was the severing of her carotid artery and jugular veins with a sharp instrument, with the concomitant splaying of blood about the scene.

Any case like this, with that magic "K" name involved, is always tried in two courts—the Superior Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the Supreme Court of the Press. The rules of admissibility of evidence in the former are based on relevance, materiality, and fairness. The rules of admissibility in the latter are based on violence, sex, and circulation.

According to that standard, it had become common knowledge that Matt Reingold had been dating Ms. Chase for several months before the murder—apparently exclusively on both sides. There were a number of witnesses to the fact that in the late afternoon of the day of the murder, the couple had been seen and heard in the piano bar of the Vendome Hotel on Commonwealth Avenue, embroiled in a verbal set-to that called to mind the second Sonny Liston–Muhammad Ali encounter. No one could recall the subject of the brouhaha, but no one could forget the heat and passion of the exchanges, punctuated with threats.

Mr. Reingold apparently went to her apartment that evening and was seen leaving a tad past midnight. The *Globe* had it "on good authority" that only he and she and a cleaning lady had keys to the apartment. He was apparently the last to see her alive.

The cleaning lady had the misfortune to discover the body the following morning about nine A.M. The coroner placed the time of death at between midnight and one A.M.

"What evidence have they got on you, Mr. O'Connor?"

"I went to her apartment at twelve-thirty, after Reingold left. I left about fifteen minutes later. Some dog-walking neighbor across the street saw me in the street lamp. He went to the D.A. first thing this morning."

"Did he know you?"

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"Yes. We'd met at dinner parties at Miss Chase's apartment a couple of times."

"Why'd he wait until now to come forward?"

"I strung him along with a promise of a big payoff if he'd lay low. Last night I finally admitted to him that I couldn't come up with the money. Now he's a model citizen. Better late than never."

"Any other evidence?"

I looked for the physical twisting, shifting, sweating—anything the body can use to release guilt, or at least fear of punishment. None of the above. You'd swear he'd just dropped in for tea and a pleasant chat.

"They have a full set of prints of my right hand on a glass. I had surgical gloves. They got ripped off in the . . . scuffle. The last thing I did was to stupidly take a drink."

"I'm sure they've had those prints for three months."

"They have, but they couldn't match them. Now that I've been identified, I'm sure they've made the match."

"Is that it?"

"They might have found my blood in the apartment. She pulled the knife out of my hand. Before I could get it back . . ." He held up his right hand. There was still scarring from a slice across the tips of the first two fingers.

I threw in a thought. "There was nothing about any blood but hers in the press."

"It didn't square with the D.A.'s theory of Reingold's guilt. They had the case solved to the satisfaction of the press. Since it wasn't his blood, no need to bring it up. Why confuse the case with facts?"

"How well do you know Reingold?"

"I don't."

"What about the murder weapon?"

"It'll never be found."

Mr. Devlin slid back in the chair in a position that makes him a double for Spencer Tracy.

"Why did you do it, Mr. O'Connor?"

"I'd rather not say. What's the difference?"

"If I'm going to fight the war, I need to know all the enemy's positions."

"You don't need this one. I'll guarantee you the D.A. won't know it either."

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"How well did you know her?"

"We both worked at Mass. General Hospital. I've known her there a few years. I've been to parties at her house a few times."

"Were you involved . . . other than as friends?"

"Out of bounds." He stood up. "I'll leave the retainer check with your secretary."

"You're not making this particularly easy."

"If it were easy, I'd go to a lawyer who'd charge half your fee."

It sounded smart-alecky, but the implication sat well with Mr. D.

When the door closed, Mr. Devlin pushed back the chair and paced to the window.

"Damn. I've defended professional killers, insane killers, stone killers. That one sets a new standard of refrigeration."

"He's comfortable with his guilt."

"Don't bet on it, sonny. Rule one is never believing the client on guilt or innocence. Get on it. Check out everything. I want the motive. If we're defending Jack the Ripper, I want to know it before the press."

Mr. Devlin's office window looks out on the *Globe* building. I was down the elevator, across six blocks, and into the *Globe* archives by the tenth gong of the Arch Street Church bell. A selective spin through six months' back issues confirmed what I'd remembered and taught me that Ms. Chase had majored in computer science at Radcliffe. She worked in the records section of Mass. General Hospital for the three years before her death. For her last six months, she had been head of computer security.

Next on the menu was a quick jog to the offices of the District Attorney in the Suffolk County courthouse building. Bill Coyne, the Deputy District Attorney, was quarterbacking the prosecution of Reingold, which was in recess for the morning while the judge handled sentencing in other cases.

Bill was a career prosecutor, with a solid sense of what the job was about. I knew him from my days with the U.S. Attorney's office. I got in to see him without any of the power games of appointments and put-offs that go with the more political types.

"Mike. What're you up to? I thought you usually worked the federal playpen."

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"Lex Devlin had a visitor this morning. What's up, Bill? You got another indictment pending in the Chase murder?"

Bill was pushing sixty. His tousled salt-and-pepper hair had never seen better than a five-dollar haircut. He wore suspenders to hold up the shiny pants of his eighty-dollar suit. He hadn't bought a new one since his wife died.

He grinned while he poured two cups of coffee without asking.

"Mikey, Mikey. You know I can't tip the hand of the grand jury."

"I wouldn't ask you to, Bill. Let's just say in a professional capacity I need to get into Ms. Chase's apartment. You have to ask why?"

There must have been a Turk in Bill's Irish background. You could walk on the coffee.

"No, I don't need to ask. No reason defense counsel shouldn't see the murder scene."

The smiles that passed between us through the plumes of coffee steam said that he knew who our client was, and that, yes, he was close enough to indictment to consider me defense counsel for a defendant. No time wasted, no embarrassing disclosures made.

Ellen Chase's apartment was in the cobblestone-and-warped-brick section of Beacon Hill that realtors pitch as "quaint." The interior was done in crystal and recognizable antiques in a style that could be described as neo-trust fund. To her credit, Ms. Chase worked but if she'd collected butterflies, she'd still have eaten—well.

I knew the police and lab crew had given it a professional scan. I could also tell by the dust that no one had been there in months. Burgundy stains in a spray pattern made it clear that the kitchen was the hot spot, with some spillover into the living room. I went through every room carefully, but nothing jumped up and grabbed me.

She had an IBM desktop computer in the bedroom that caught my eye. I brought it to life and checked through the list of files on the hard disk. She kept records of everything from laundry to taxes. It took a couple of hours to bring up each one and scan through it.

The only file that was not self-explanatory was a list of seven names and addresses, most in the city, all male, and none familiar.

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I punched up Bill Coyne's numbers on the phone beside the bed.

"Bill, what's this file . . . ?"

"I don't know, Mike. Seven names, right? I knew you'd find it."

"And I knew you'd check it out. What is it?"

"I have no idea. None of the people on that list even knew her. Or each other for that matter. Three of them are lawyers with some of the big banking and trust firms. Two of them are doctors on the staffs of hospitals, not hers. One's in the top office of an accounting firm, and one's dead."

"When?"

"Two months ago. Jason Starkwell. Died of some kind of raging infection at Saint Elizabeth's. You want a coincidence? We found that same list of names and numbers in Reingold's wallet. Needless to say, he's exercising his constitutional rights and clamming up."

I fixated on the list primarily because I had no other thread to unravel. It was play-a-hunch time. I caught a cab to Mass. General Hospital and asked my way back through the labyrinth to the office previously occupied by Ellen Chase. I was directed to a small office to the rear of a room with a platoon of computers.

Shiny new lettering on the door told me that Margaret Dolan was Ellen Chase's replacement.

I knocked and accepted the "Come in." I closed the door behind me.

The tall, slender woman behind the desk looked all business, until she spun around from the sidesaddle computer counter with an easy smile that looked warmer than anything I could expect over a severe business suit. She was one side or the other of thirty, and with the pulling of three or four bobby pins, could have been attractive.

"Miss Dolan, I'm Michael Knight. I'm a lawyer. I'd like to talk to you about Ellen Chase."

The lawyer part tightened her eyes a bit, but Ellen Chase's name brought her back.

"Which side do you represent, Mr. Knight?"

"That's a good question. I guess I represent the side that wants to find out what really happened to Miss Chase and why. Did you know her?"

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Her color drained a bit when she explained that they had been college classmates and close friends. They had both come to Mass. General at about the same time, but Ellen had been promoted to chief of computer security before her.

"When Ellen . . . was killed, they moved me up here."

She said it with clearly mixed emotions.

"I'll tell you why I'm here, Miss Dolan. There's this funny habit the police have. Sometimes they find a viable suspect and they lose their objectivity. They focus on nailing the suspect rather than finding out what really happened."

"Is that what happened?"

"Actually, they know very little. There's a lead that might tell us more than anything they know. Ellen Chase had a list of seven names and addresses in her computer. It's the only thing there that can't be explained. There could be a connection between the seven that might give us a lead."

She was afraid to ask the next question.

"What do you want me to do?"

I knew it was touch-and-go, but as the golfers say, "Never up, never in."

"I think that computer on your desk could tell us two things. Are the seven all in Mass. General's records? Number two, do they have anything in common?"

Those slender fingers made quick little gestures that told me she was strung tighter than Heifitz's fiddle. She looked down at the desk.

"I can't do that. Those are confidential files."

"I know that. And I know what I'm asking. Now you've got to weigh two things. If you tell me what I need to know, I'll do everything in my power to keep the information confidential. That's not a perfect answer. On the other hand, if you don't, there could be a man out there free who has no qualms about slicing women's throats. There could be more victims."

The pressure was squeezing moisture out of the corners of her eyes. She shook her head.

"I can't. They trust me."

"I know. On the other hand, I think if Ellen could be standing here, she'd be trusting you to take her murderer off the streets before he does it to someone else. I'm standing in her place."

She stood up, but her eyes never left her desk. I could see her hands shaking in the pockets of her suit. She just shook her head.

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"Please leave."

A strike-out in the bottom of the ninth when you're the last batter drains the sap out of you. I had no idea where to go from there.

When I opened the door to leave I could hear the muffled sobs behind me. I felt as sorry for her as I did for myself.

"I understand, Miss Dolan. I don't know what I'd do in your place. Someday maybe we'll both have to explain it to Ellen."

I nearly closed the door on a muffled, "Wait."

With what Margaret Dolan told me, the pieces were beginning to meld. I still needed that final bit of confirmation that required one of those slightly irregular moves that wouldn't get Mr. Devlin's before-the-fact clearance.

I looked up the business number of Alexander Lovett, one of the three lawyers on the list of seven. I preferred to have him on the frying pan of an office phone rather than behind a martini in his home and castle. Time was of the essence.

His dispassionate secretary said he was with a client. So much the better.

"Buzz him anyway, please. Mention the name Reingold, and tell him I haven't time to call twice. I'll wait a full ten seconds."

The male, fiftyish voice that came on in eight seconds was suppressing shock, anger, and fear under a coating of professional insouciance.

"I'm sorry. I'm not at liberty. . . ."

"Neither is Mr. Reingold. You probably know that if you read the papers. You also probably thought it was over. It's not. I'm the next contact. The arrangements stay the same."

He almost gagged.

"How do I know . . . whom you represent?"

"One easy way. Suppose I mention over this phone the fact that cements you to Mr. Reingold."

"Just a minute."

I could hear him making excuses that shuffled the client out of the office. When the door clicked, the anger was less restrained.

"What do you want?"

"I'm acting for Reingold. The beat goes on. You're late, right?"

"I know. There was obviously no way to reach him. How do you propose we do this?"

"Same as with Reingold. Confirm it. How much and where?"

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"Don't you know?"

"I want to be sure we're on the same wavelength. If I say it, it may be a bit more explicit than you want on this phone."

There was a pause while he decided not to run the risk.

"Five thousand. Public garden. Usual bench. Six o'clock."

That was it. Two-thirds of the puzzle was in place. If I had called Lovett or anyone else on that list of seven and asked straight out if he was being blackmailed by Reingold, he'd have denied it. The hunch sprang from the relationship between Reingold and Ellen Chase and her access to the computerized medical files of Mass. General Hospital. The clincher was Margaret Dolan's pulling up the information that each of those seven vulnerable professionals had AIDS.

But a hunch is a hunch. It took an unpleasant phone call to Lovett to confirm Reingold's blackmail operation. Before I hung up, I assured Lovett that he was off that particular hook as far as I was concerned. He was shaken, and somewhat confused, but relieved.

It was two in the afternoon when I reached Mr. Devlin's office. I passed O'Connor in the waiting room. I took the opportunity to give Mr. Devlin the morning's details before he called O'Connor into the office.

"Sit down, Mr. O'Connor. We've got business to do. Let's start with the assumption that we're playing on the same team. Fair enough?"

He looked baffled.

"I'll be more specific. You didn't kill Ellen Chase, did you?"

His back stiffened. "I'll stand by my previous . . ."

"Well I won't. The D.A. sent over a copy of the prints found on that glass, the one you used for a drink just before you left the apartment after the murder. Take a look. As you said, perfect set of prints, right?"

"Exactly. The point being?"

"Couldn't happen. Look at the scarring on your first two fingers from a cut you said she gave you in the struggle. No sign of them on the prints. No bloody smudges. This glass was a set-up. And you're just letting it happen. That suggests one question."

Mr. O'Connor just sat there frozen.

"When did you first learn that you had it?"

I saw his lips part, but there was no sound.

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"More to the point, Mr. O'Connor, when did Reingold find out you had AIDS?"

Mr. O'Connor's fingers squeezed folds in the leather arms of the chair. First the tears came, and then a release of sobs. Mr. Devlin gave him all the time he needed. There was more openness in his voice when he spoke.

"I took a physical when I bought insurance from him about a year ago. That's when we both found out. I needed the job at the hospital for medical insurance. He promised to cover it up if I'd help him. He had me put him in touch with Ellen Chase. She was chief of computer security."

"Did he blackmail her?"

He shook his head. "Have you seen him? It was pure romance. He's an accomplished ladies' man."

"Why did he kill her?"

"She thought he was using the computer files she gave him to sell insurance to people who couldn't get it anywhere else. When she found out what he was doing with the information, she confronted him that afternoon at the Vendome. Threatened to turn him in."

"How did you get involved?"

"He called me from her apartment after he'd done it. He told me to come over so I'd be seen leaving the apartment by the man who always walks his dog around twelve-thirty. He told me to bring a glass with me to plant. He cut my fingers to leave traces of my blood. I'd have been indicted sooner if that neighbor had gone straight to the police. I stalled him with the promise of a bribe until Reingold's trial began."

I had to ask the question. "Do you mean you're willing to take a conviction for murder one to keep him quiet?"

Mr. Devlin jumped in. "No one goes that far, even for blackmail. It's the double-jeopardy switch, right, O'Connor? You and Reingold set it up so after the case was pending against him, they'd discover the evidence against you and indict you. Then they'd dismiss the indictment against him. He could never be tried for it again. Then I suppose the plan is that he's supposed to produce evidence that he actually committed the murder, and you're off the hook."

He nodded.

"What's your insurance? What's the evidence that he did it?"

"A videotape. He videotaped the actual murder with Ellen's camera. He played it for me that night. He put it into a safe-

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deposit box at the Boston Bank on Washington Street. He'll give it to me as soon as he's released."

"What makes you think you can trust him?"

He shrugged. "Having absolutely no choice. It's my only out."

The indictment against O'Connor came down at 3:00 P.M. Bill Coyne called Mr. Devlin at 3:02.

"Bill, will you trust me? I'll bring him in myself in two hours. I need that time."

Whatever conditions Bill put on it, the answer came down to "Yes."

Mr. Devlin faced O'Connor squarely. "You've got to cooperate if I'm going to get you out of this thing."

"If that means going back on my deal with Reingold, I can't. I don't dare."

Mr. Devlin was on his feet and heading to the door. "Then it's out of your hands."

Mr. Devlin called me to the corridor and walked me to the elevator while he rattled off a string of instructions.

An hour later, Mr. Devlin brought Mr. O'Connor into the Washington Street branch of the Boston Bank. I was already there, in the safe-deposit vault with the president.

Mr. O'Connor's forehead was beaded with perspiration. I could hear Mr. Devlin's voice as they came in.

"Of course we could get a court order to drill Reingold's safe-deposit box. You said it contains direct evidence of a murder. I had Michael take care of it. They should be about to drill."

They came into the room as the president and I were watching the heavy steel bit spin splinters out of the lock of the metal box. In a short while, the president pulled the box free.

O'Connor was practically pacing.

"How did you know which box?"

Mr. Devlin held him in check. "Bank records. It's the only one in Reingold's name. Come over here."

It was like the opening of the vault of the Titanic. Mr. Devlin held out the closed box, but Mr. O'Connor wouldn't touch it. Mr. Devlin pulled up the lid, and Mr. O'Connor went from pale to ghostly.

His mind seemed to freeze as he stared into the empty box. Then a flush came into his face with a swelling tide of anger that seemed to overwhelm him. The words burst out of him. His

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impulse to blare out every detail of the murder, the videotape, and the double-jeopardy scheme was more than Mr. Devlin could let pass.

The president allowed us to use his office and a secretary to transcribe the statement. Mr. O'Connor put her shorthand speed to the test, as the story poured out of him. He scanned it before signing it only because Mr. Devlin insisted.

It was a ten-minute cab ride, cut to five by an advance tip, to Bill Coyne's office. He was in the process of dispatching an assistant D.A. to assent to a motion by Reingold's attorney to dismiss the indictment against him.

Mr. Devlin held up the assistant until Bill could read Mr. O'Connor's statement. Bill looked at Mr. Devlin as if he'd snatched him out of the path of a truck.

"Any idea where the videotape is, Lex?"

"Sure. It's probably in Reingold's safe-deposit box in the Boston Bank, where he put it that morning after the murder. He didn't have time to move it before you arrested him. On the other hand, you can bet it wouldn't have been there ten minutes after you released him. With O'Connor's statement, you should be able to get a court order to open the box."

"But I thought you did. What box did you have drilled?"

I cut in. "My own. Mr. Devlin had me run to the bank and rent a box and then make arrangements to have it drilled. It was expensive, but at least I knew it'd be empty. Without O'Connor's cooperation, we couldn't have had Reingold's box drilled."

Bill looked at the old man with a half-grin. "You mousetrapped your own client?"

"I had to for his own sake. Reingold would have left him with a murder-one conviction as sure as there's an Irishman in South Boston. If O'Connor'd beaten that one, he'd at least face charges of fraud on the court."

"Which he may anyway."

Mr. Devlin put an arm on Bill's shoulder. "Not if I'm any judge of the Deputy District Attorney. The man was blackmailed into it. He handed you a murder conviction on a platter and broke up a very neat attempted fraud. My guess is you won't even indict him on the fraud. Could I be right about that, Mr. Coyne?"

I couldn't hear what Bill said, but they were both laughing when they walked out of the office. ●

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Art by Ron Chironna

ONE OF THOSE DAYS, ONE OF THOSE NIGHTS

by Ed Gorman

The thing you have to understand is that I found it by accident. I was looking for a place to hide the birthday gift I'd bought Laura—a string of pearls she'd been wanting to wear with the new black dress she'd bought for herself—and all I was going to do was lay the gift-wrapped box in the second drawer of her bureau . . .

. . . and there it was.

A plain number-ten envelope with her name written across the middle in a big manly scrawl and a canceled Elvis Presley stamp up in the corner. Postmarked two days ago.

Just as I spotted it, Laura called from the living room, "Bye, honey, see you at six." The last two years we've been saving to

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buy a house so we have only the one car. Laura goes an hour earlier than I do, so she rides with a woman who lives a few blocks over. Then I pick her up at six after somebody relieves me at the computer store where I work. For what it's worth, I have an M.A. in English Literature but with the economy being what it is, it hasn't done me much good.

I saw a sci-fi movie once where a guy could set something on fire simply by staring at it intently enough. That's what I was trying to do with this letter my wife got. Burn it so that I wouldn't have to read what it said inside and get my heart broken.

I closed the drawer.

Could be completely harmless. Her fifteenth high-school reunion was coming up this spring. Maybe it was from one of her old classmates. And maybe the manly scrawl wasn't so manly after all. Maybe it was from a woman who wrote in a rolling dramatic hand.

Laura always said that I was the jealous type and this was certainly proof. A harmless letter tucked harmlessly in a bureau drawer. And here my heart was pounding, and fine cold sweat slicked my face, and my fingers were trembling.

God, wasn't I a pitiful guy? Shouldn't I be ashamed of myself?

I went into the bathroom and lathered up and did my usual relentless fifteen-minute morning regimen of shaving, showering, and shining up my apple-cheeked Irish face and my thinning Irish hair, if hair follicles can have a nationality, that is.

Then I went back into our bedroom and took down a white shirt, blue necktie, navy blazer, and tan slacks. All dressed, I looked just like seventy or eighty million other men getting ready for work this particular sunny April morning.

Then I stood very still in the middle of the bedroom and stared at Laura's bureau. Maybe I wasn't simply going to set the letter

In 1994, the second year in which the British Crime Writers Association offered an award for Best Short Story, an American appeared on the list with a story published only in the U.K., in the anthology *Crime Yellow*. The story was "One of Those Days, One of Those Nights," the author Ed Gorman. *EQMM* is pleased to be publishing the story for the first time in the United States. ¶

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on fire. Maybe I was going to ignite the entire bureau.

The grandfather clock in the living room tolled eight-thirty. If I didn't leave now I would be late, and if you were late you inevitably got a chewing-out from Ms. Sanders, the boss. Anybody who believes that women would run a more benign world than men needs only to spend five minutes with Ms. Sanders. Hitler would have used her as a pin-up girl.

The bureau. The letter. The manly scrawl.

What was I going to do?

Only one thing I could think of, since I hadn't made a decision about reading the letter or not. I'd simply take it with me to work. If I decided to read it, I'd give it a quick scan over my lunch hour.

But probably I wouldn't read it at all. I had a lot of faith where Laura was concerned. And I didn't like to think of myself as the sort of possessive guy who snuck around reading his wife's mail.

I reached into the bureau drawer.

My fingers touched the letter.

I was almost certain I wasn't going to read it. Hell, I'd probably get so busy at work that I'd forget all about it.

But just in case I decided to . . .

I grabbed the letter and stuffed it into my blazer pocket, and closed the drawer. In the kitchen I had a final cup of coffee and read my newspaper horoscope. Bad news, as always. I should never read the damn things. . . . Then I hurried out of the apartment to the little Toyota parked at the curb.

Six blocks away, it stalled. Our friendly mechanic said that moisture seemed to get in the fuel pump a lot. He's not sure why. We've run it in three times but it still stalls several times a week.

Around ten o'clock, hurrying into a sales meeting that Ms. Sanders had decided to call, I dropped my pen. And when I bent over to pick it up, my glasses fell out of my pocket, and when I moved to pick them up, I took one step too many and put all 175 pounds of my body directly onto them. I heard something snap.

By the time I retrieved both pen and glasses, Ms. Sanders was closing the door and calling the meeting to order. I hurried down the hall, trying to see how much damage I'd done. I held the glasses up to the light. A major fissure snaked down the

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center of the right lens. I slipped them on. The crack was even more difficult to see through than I'd thought.

Ms. Sanders, a very attractive fiftyish woman given to sleek gray suits and burning blue gazes, warned us as usual that if sales of our computers didn't pick up, two or three people in this room would likely be looking for jobs. Soon. And just as she finished saying this, her eyes met mine. "For instance, Donaldson, what kind of month are you having?"

"What kind of month am I having?"

"Do I hear a parrot in here?" Ms. Sanders said, and several of the salespeople laughed.

"I'm not having too bad a month."

Ms. Sanders nodded wearily and looked around the room. "Do we have to ask Donaldson here any more questions? Isn't he telling us everything we need to know when he says, 'I'm not having too bad a month'? What're we hearing when Donaldson says that?"

I hadn't noticed till this morning how much Ms. Sanders reminded me of Miss Hutchison, my fourth-grade teacher. Her favorite weapon had also been humiliation.

Dick Weybright raised his hand. Dick Weybright always raises his hand, especially when he gets to help Ms. Sanders humiliate somebody.

"We hear defeatism when he says that," Dick said. "We hear defeatism and a serious lack of self-esteem."

Twice a week, Ms. Sanders made us listen to motivational tapes. You know, "I upped my income, up yours," that sort of thing. And nobody took those tapes more seriously than Dick Weybright.

"Very good, Dick," Ms. Sanders said. "Defeatism and lack of self-esteem. That tells us all we need to know about Donaldson here. Just as the fact that he's got a crack in his glasses tells us something else about him, doesn't it?"

Dick Weybright waggled his hand again. "Lack of self-respect."

"Exactly," Ms. Sanders said, smiling coldly at me. "Lack of self-respect."

She didn't address me again until I was leaving the sales room. I'd knocked some of my papers on the floor. By the time I got them picked up, I was alone with Ms. Sanders. I heard her come up behind me as I pointed myself toward the door.

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"You missed something, Donaldson."

I turned. "Oh?"

She waved Laura's envelope in the air. Then her blue eyes showed curiosity as they read the name on the envelope. "You're not one of those, are you, Donaldson?"

"One of those?"

"Men who read their wives' mail?"

"Oh. One of those. I see."

"Are you?"

"No."

"Then what're you doing with this?"

"What am I doing with that?"

"That parrot's in here again."

"I must've picked it up off the table by mistake."

"The table?"

"The little Edwardian table under the mirror in the foyer. Where we always set the mail."

She shook her head again. She shook her head a lot. "You are one of those, aren't you, Donaldson? So were my first three husbands, the bastards."

She handed me the envelope, brushed past me, and disappeared down the hall.

There's a park near the river where I usually eat lunch when I'm downtown for the day. I spend most of the time feeding the pigeons.

Today I spent most of my time staring at the envelope laid next to me on the park bench. There was a warm spring breeze and I half-hoped it would lift up the envelope and carry it away.

Now I wished I'd left the number-ten with the manly scrawl right where I'd found it because it was getting harder and harder to resist lifting the letter from inside and giving it a quick read.

I checked my watch. Twenty minutes to go before I needed to be back at work. Twenty minutes to stare at the letter. Twenty minutes to resist temptation.

Twenty minutes—and how's this for cheap symbolism?—during which the sky went from cloudless blue to dark and ominous.

By now, I'd pretty much decided that the letter had to be from a man. Otherwise, why would Laura have hidden it in her drawer? I'd also decided that it must contain something pretty incriminating.

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Had she been having an affair with somebody? Was she thinking of running away with somebody?

On the way back to the office, I carefully slipped the letter from the envelope and read it. Read it four times, as a matter of fact. And felt worse every time I did.

So Chris Tomlin, her ridiculously handsome, ridiculously wealthy, ridiculously slick college boyfriend was back in her life.

I can't tell you much about the rest of the afternoon. It's all very vague: Voices spoke to me, phones rang at me, computer printers spat things at me—but I didn't respond. I felt as if I were scuttling across the floor of an ocean so deep that neither light nor sound could penetrate it.

Chris Tomlin. My God.

I kept reading the letter, stopping only when I'd memorized it entirely and could keep rerunning it in my mind without any visual aid.

Dear Laura,

I still haven't forgotten you—or forgiven you for choosing you-know-who over me.

I'm going to be in your fair city this Friday. How about meeting me at the Fairmont right at noon for lunch?

Of course, you could contact me the evening before if you're interested. I'll be staying at the Wallingham. I did a little checking and found that you work nearby.

I can't wait to see you.

Love,
Chris Tomlin

Not even good old Ms. Sanders could penetrate my stupor. I know she charged into my office a few times and made some nasty threats—something about my not returning the call of one of our most important customers—but I honestly couldn't tell you who she wanted me to call or what she wanted me to say.

About all I can remember is that it got very dark and cold suddenly. The lights blinked on and off a few times. We were having a terrible rainstorm. Somebody came in soaked and said that the storm sewers were backing up and that downtown was a mess.

Not that I paid this information any particular heed.

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I was wondering if she'd call him Thursday night. I took it as a foregone conclusion that she would have lunch with him on Friday. But how about Thursday night?

Would she visit him in his hotel room?

And come to think of it, why *had* she chosen me over Chris Tomlin? I mean, while I may not be a nerd, I'm not exactly a movie star, either. And with Chris Tomlin, there wouldn't have been any penny-pinching for a down payment on a house, either.

With his daddy's millions in pharmaceuticals, good ol' Chris would have bought her a manse as a wedding present.

The workday ended. The usual number of people peeked into my office to say the usual number of good nights. The usual cleaning crew, high-school kids in gray uniforms, appeared to start hauling out trash and run roaring vacuum cleaners. And I went through my usual process of staying at my desk until it was time to pick up Laura.

I was just about to walk out the front door when I noticed in the gloom that Ms. Sanders's light was still on.

She had good ears. Even above the vacuum cleaner roaring its way down the hall to her left, she heard me leaving and looked up.

She waved me into her office.

When I reached her desk, she handed me a slip of paper with some typing on it.

"How does that read to you, Donaldson?"

"Uh, what is it?"

"A Help Wanted ad I may be running tomorrow."

That was another thing Miss Hutchison, my fourth-grade teacher, had been good at—indirect torture.

Ms. Sanders wanted me to read the ad she'd be running for my replacement.

I scanned it and handed it back.

"Nice."

"Is that all you have to say? Nice?"

"I guess so."

"You realize that this means I'm going to fire you?"

"That's what I took it to mean."

"What the hell's wrong with you, Donaldson? Usually you'd be groveling and sniveling by now."

"I've got some—personal problems."

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A smirk. "That's what you get for reading your wife's mail." Then a scowl. "When you come in tomorrow morning, you come straight to my office, you understand?"

I nodded. "All right."

"And be prepared to do some groveling and sniveling. You're going to need it."

Why don't I just make a list of the things I found wrong with my Toyota after I slammed the door and belted myself in.

A) The motor wouldn't turn over. Remember what I said about moisture and the fuel pump?

B) The roof had sprung a new leak. This was different from the old leak, which dribbled rain down onto the passenger seat. The new one dribbled rain down onto the driver's seat.

C) The turn-signal arm had come loose again and was hanging down from naked wires like a half-amputated limb. Apparently, after finding the letter this morning, I was in so much of a fog I hadn't noticed that it was broken again.

I can't tell you how dark and cold and lonely I felt just then. Bereft of wife. Bereft of automobile. Bereft of—dare I say it?—self-esteem and self-respect. And, on top of it, I was a disciple of defeatism. Just ask my co-worker Dick Weybright.

The goddamned car finally started and I drove off to pick up my goddamned wife.

The city was a mess.

Lashing winds and lashing rains—both of which were still lashing merrily along—had uprooted trees in the park, smashed out store windows here and there, and had apparently caused a power outage that shut down all the automatic traffic signals.

I wanted to be home and I wanted to be dry and I wanted to be in my jammies. But most of all I wanted to be loved by the one woman I had ever really and truly loved.

If only I hadn't opened her bureau drawer to hide her pearls. . . .

She was standing behind the glass door in the entrance to the art-deco building where she works as a market researcher for a mutual-fund company. When I saw her, I felt all sorts of things at once—love, anger, shame, terror—and all I wanted to do was park the car and run up to her and take her in my arms and give her the tenderest kiss I was capable of.

But then I remembered the letter and . . .

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Well, I'm sure I don't have to tell you about jealousy. There's nothing worse to carry around in your stony little heart. All that rage and self-righteousness and self-pity. It begins to smother you and . . .

By the time Laura climbed into the car, it was smothering me. She smelled of rain and perfume and her sweet tender body.

"Hi," she said. "I was worried about you."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

Then, closing the door, she gave me a long, long look. "Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"Then why did you say, 'Yeah. I'll bet'?"

"Just being funny."

She gave me another stare. I tried to look regular and normal. You know, not on the verge of whipping the letter out and shoving it in her face.

"Boy, this is really leaking."

I just drove. There was a burly traffic cop out in the middle of a busy intersection directing traffic with two flashlights in the rain and gloom.

"Did you hear me, Rich? I said this is really leaking."

"I know it's really leaking."

"What's up with you, anyway? What're you so mad about? Did Sanders give you a hard time today?"

"No—other than telling me that she may fire me."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"But why?"

Because while I was going through your bureau, I found a letter from your ex-lover and I know all about the tryst you're planning to set up.

That's what I wanted to say.

What I said was: "I guess I wasn't paying proper attention during another one of her goddamned sales meetings."

"But Rich, if you get fired—"

She didn't have to finish her sentence. If I got fired, we'd never get the house we'd been saving for.

"She told me that when I came in tomorrow morning, I should be prepared to grovel and snivel. And she wasn't kidding."

"She actually said that?"

"She actually said that."

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"What a bitch."

"Boss's daughter. You know how this city is. The last frontier for hard-core nepotism."

We drove on several more blocks, stopping every quarter-block or so to pull out around somebody whose car had stalled in the dirty water backing up from the sewers.

"So is that why you're so down?"

"Yeah," I said. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"Usually, about Sanders, I mean, you get mad. You don't get depressed."

"Well, Sanders chews me out but she doesn't usually threaten to fire me."

"That's true. But—"

"But what?"

"It just seems that there's—something else." Then, "Where're you going?"

My mind had been on the letter tucked inside my blazer. In the meantime, the Toyota had been guiding itself into the most violent neighborhood in the city. Not even the cops wanted to come here.

"God, can you turn around?" Laura said. "I'd sure hate to get stuck here."

"We'll be all right. I'll hang a left at the next corner and then we'll drive back to Marymount Avenue."

"I wondered where you were going. I should have said something." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

That boil of feelings, of profound tenderness and profound rage, churned up inside of me again.

"Things'll work out with Sanders," she said, and then smiled. "Maybe she just hasn't been sleeping well lately. You know her and her insomniac jags."

I looked over at her and I couldn't help it. The rage was gone, replaced by pure and total love. This was my friend, my bride, my lover. There had to be a reasonable and innocent explanation for the letter. There had to.

I started hanging the left and that's when it happened. The fuel pump. Rain.

The Toyota stopped dead.

"Oh no," she said, glancing out the windshield at the forbidding blocks of falling-down houses and dark, condemned buildings.

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Beyond the wind, beyond the rain, you could hear sirens. There were always sirens in neighborhoods like these.

"Maybe I can fix it," I said.

"But honey, you don't know anything about cars."

"Well, I watched him make that adjustment last time."

"I don't know," she said skeptically. "Besides, you'll just get wet."

"I'll be fine."

I knew why I was doing this, of course. In addition to being rich, powerful, and handsome, Chris Tomlin was also one of those men who could fix practically anything. I remembered her telling me how he'd fixed a refrigerator at an old cabin they'd once stayed in.

I opened the door. A wave of rain washed over me. But I was determined to act like the kind of guy who could walk through a meteor storm and laugh it off. Maybe that's why Laura was considering a rendezvous with Chris. Maybe she was sick of my whining. A macho man, I'm not.

"Just be careful," she said.

"Be right back."

I eased out of the car and then realized I hadn't used the hood latch inside. I leaned in and popped the latch and gave Laura a quick smile.

And then I went back outside into the storm.

I was soaked completely in less than a minute, my shoes soggy, my clothes drenched and cold and clinging. Even my raincoat.

But I figured this would help my image as a take-charge sort of guy. I even gave Laura a little half-salute before I raised the hood. She smiled at me. God, I wanted to forget all about the letter and be happily in love again.

Any vague hopes I'd had of starting the car were soon forgotten as I gaped at the motor and realized that I had absolutely no idea what I was looking at.

The mechanic in the shop had made it look very simple. You raised the hood, you leaned in and snatched off the oil filter and then did a couple of quick things to it and put it back. And *voilà,* your car was running again.

I got the hood open all right, and I leaned in just fine, and I even took the oil filter off with no problem.

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But when it came to doing a couple of quick things to it, my brain was as dead as the motor. That was the part I hadn't picked up from the mechanic. Those couple of quick things.

I started shaking the oil filter. Don't ask me why. I had it under the protection of the hood to keep it dry and shook it left and shook it right and shook it high and shook it low. I figured that maybe some kind of invisible cosmic forces would come into play here and the engine would start as soon as I gave the ignition key a little turn.

I closed the hood and ran back through the slashing rain, opened the door, and crawled inside.

"God, it's incredible out there."

Only then did I get a real good look at Laura and only then did I see that she looked sick, like the time we both picked up a slight case of ptomaine poisoning at her friend Susan's wedding.

Except now she looked a lot sicker.

And then I saw the guy.

In the backseat.

"Who the hell are you?"

But he had questions of his own. "Your wife won't tell me if you've got an ATM card."

So it had finally happened. Our little city turned violent about fifteen years ago, during which time most honest working folks had to take their turns getting mugged, sort of like a rite of passage. But as time wore on, the muggers weren't satisfied with simply robbing their victims. Now they beat them up. And sometimes, for no reason at all, they killed them.

This guy was white, chunky, with a ragged scar on his left cheek, stupid dark eyes, a dark turtleneck sweater, and a large and formidable gun. He smelled of sweat, cigarette smoke, beer, and a high, sweet, unclean tang.

"How much can you get with your card?"

"Couple hundred."

"Yeah. Right."

"Couple hundred. I mean, we're not exactly rich people. Look at this car."

He turned to Laura. "How much can he get, babe?"

"He told you. A couple of hundred." She sounded surprisingly calm.

"One more time." He had turned back to me. "How much can you get with that card of yours?"

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"I told you," I said.

You know how movie thugs are always slugging people with gun butts? Well, let me tell you something. It hurts. He hit me hard enough to draw blood, hard enough to fill my sight with darkness and blinking stars, like a planetarium ceiling, and hard enough to lay my forehead against the steering wheel.

Laura didn't scream.

She just leaned over and touched my head with her long, gentle fingers. And you know what? Even then, even suffering from what might be a concussion, I had this image of Laura's fingers touching Chris Tomlin's head this way. Ain't jealousy grand?

"Now," said the voice in the backseat, "let's talk."

Neither of us paid him much attention for a minute or so. Laura helped me sit back in the seat. She took her handkerchief and daubed it against the back of my head.

"You didn't have to hit him."

"Now maybe he'll tell me the truth."

"Four or five hundred," she said. "That's how much we can get. And don't hit him again. Don't lay a finger on him."

"The mama lion fights for her little cub. That's nice." He leaned forward and put the end of the gun directly against my ear. "You're gonna have to go back out in that nasty ol' rain. There's an ATM machine down at the west end of this block and around the corner. You go down there and get me five hundred dollars and then you haul your ass right back. I'll be waiting right here with your exceedingly good-looking wife. And with my gun."

"Where did you ever learn a word like exceedingly?" I said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"I was just curious."

"If it's any of your goddamned business, my cellmate had one of them improve-your-vocabulary books."

I glanced at Laura. She still looked scared but she also looked a little bit angry. For us, five hundred dollars was a lot of money.

And now a robber who used the word "exceedingly" was going to take every last dime of it.

"Go get it," he said.

I reached over to touch Laura's hand as reassuringly as possible, and that was when I noticed it.

The white number-ten envelope.

The one Chris had sent her.

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I stared at it a long moment and then raised my eyes to meet hers.

"I was going to tell you about it."

I shook my head. "I shouldn't have looked in your drawer."

"No, you shouldn't have. But I still owe you an explanation."

"What the hell are you two talking about?"

"Nothing that's exceedingly interesting," I said, and opened the door and dangled a leg out and then had the rest of my body follow the leg.

"You got five minutes, you understand?" the man said.

I nodded and glanced at Laura. "I love you."

"I'm sorry about the letter."

"You know the funny thing? I was hiding your present, that's how I found it. I was going to tuck it in your underwear drawer and have you find them. You know, the pearls."

"You got me the pearl necklace?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, honey, that's so sweet."

"Go get the goddamned money," the man said, "and get it fast."

"I'll be right back," I said to Laura and blew her a little kiss.

If I hadn't been sodden before, I certainly was now.

There were two brick buildings facing each other across a narrow alley. Most people drove up to this particular ATM machine because it was housed in a deep indentation that faced the alley. It could also accommodate foot traffic.

What it didn't do was give you much protection from the storm.

By now, I was sneezing and feeling a scratchiness in my throat. Bad sinuses. My whole family.

I walked up to the oasis of light and technology in this ancient and wild neighborhood, took out my wallet, and inserted my ATM card.

It was all very casual, especially considering the fact that Laura was being held hostage.

The card would go in. The money would come out. The thief would get his loot. Laura and I would dash to the nearest phone and call the police.

Except I couldn't remember my secret pin number.

If I had to estimate how many times I'd used this card, I'd put it at probably a thousand or so.

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So how, after all those times, could I now forget the pin number?

Panic. That's what was wrong. I was so scared that Laura would be hurt that I couldn't think clearly.

Deep breaths. There.

Now. Think. Clearly.

Just relax and your pin number will come back to you. No problem.

That was when I noticed the slight black man in the rain parka standing just to the left of me. In the rain. With a gun in his hand.

"You wanna die?"

"Oh, shit. You've got to be kidding. You're a goddamned thief?"

"Yes, and I ain't ashamed of it either, man."

I thought of explaining it to him, explaining that another thief already had first dibs on the proceeds of my bank account—that is, if I could ever remember the pin number—but he didn't seem to be the understanding type at all. In fact, he looked even more desperate and crazy than the man who was holding Laura.

"How much can you take out?"

"I can't give it to you."

"You see this gun, man?"

"Yeah. I see it."

"You know what happens if you don't crank some serious money out for me?"

I had to explain after all. " . . . so, you see, I can't give it to you."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Somebody's already got dibs on it."

"Dibs? What the hell does 'dibs' mean?"

"It means another robber has already spoken for this money."

He looked at me carefully. "You're crazy, man. You really are. But that don't mean I won't shoot you."

"And there's one more thing."

"What?"

"I can't remember my pin number."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. That's why I've been standing here. My mind's a blank."

"You gotta relax, man."

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"I know that. But it's kind of hard. You've got a gun and so does the other guy."

"There's really some other dude holdin' your old lady?"

"Right."

He grinned with exceedingly bad teeth. "You got yourself a real problem, dude."

I closed my eyes.

I must have spent my five minutes already.

Would he really kill Laura?

"You tried deep breathin'?"

"Yeah."

"And that didn't work?"

"Huh-uh."

"You tried makin' your mind go blank for a little bit?"

"That didn't work, either."

He pushed the gun right into my face. "I ain't got much time, man."

"I can't give you the money, anyway."

"You ain't gonna be much use to your old lady if you got six or seven bullet holes in you."

"God!"

"What's wrong?"

My pin number had popped into my head.

Nothing like a gun in your face to jog your memory.

I dove for the ATM machine.

And started punching buttons.

The right buttons.

"Listen," I said as I cranked away, "I really can't give you this money."

"Right."

"I mean, I would if I could but the guy would never believe me if I told him some other crook had taken it. No offense, 'crook,' I mean."

"Here it comes."

"I'm serious. You can't have it."

"Pretty, pretty Yankee dollars. Praise the Lord."

The plastic cover opened and the machine began spitting out green Yankee dollars.

And that's when he slugged me on the back of the head.

The guy back in the car had hit me but it had been nothing like this.

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This time, the field of black floating in front of my eyes didn't even have stars. This time, hot shooting pain traveled from the point of impact near the top of my skull all the way down into my neck and shoulders. This time, my knees gave out immediately.

Pavement. Hard. Wet. Smelling of cold rain. And still the darkness. Total darkness. I had a moment of panic. Had I been blinded for life? I wanted to be angry but I was too disoriented. Pain. Cold. Darkness.

And then I felt his hands tearing the money from mine.

I had to hold on to it. Had to. Otherwise Laura would be injured. Or killed.

The kick landed hard just above my sternum. Stars suddenly appeared in the field of black. His foot seemed to have jarred them loose.

More pain. But now there was anger. I blindly lashed out and grabbed his trouser leg, clung to it, forcing him to drag me down the sidewalk as he tried to get away. I don't know how many names I called him, some of them probably didn't even make sense, I just clung to his leg, exulting in his rage, in his inability to get rid of me.

Then he leaned down and grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled so hard I screamed. And inadvertently let go of his leg.

And then I heard his footsteps, retreating, retreating, and felt the rain start slashing at me again. He had dragged me out from beneath the protection of the ATM overhang.

I struggled to get up. It wasn't easy. I still couldn't see. And every time I tried to stand, I was overcome by dizziness and a faint nausea.

But I kept thinking of Laura. And kept pushing myself to my feet, no matter how much pain pounded in my head, no matter how I started to pitch forward and collapse again.

By the time I got to my feet, and fell against the rough brick of the building for support, my eyesight was back. Funny how much you take it for granted. It's terrifying when it's gone.

I looked at the oasis of light in the gloom. At the foot of the ATM was my bank card. I wobbled over and picked it up. I knew that I'd taken out my allotted amount for the day but I decided to try and see if the cosmic forces were with me for once.

They weren't.

The only thing I got from the machine was a snotty little note saying that I'd have to contact my personal banker if I wanted to receive more money.

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A) I had no idea who this personal banker was, and

B) I doubted that he would be happy if I called him at home on such a rainy night even if I did have his name and number.

Then I did what any red-blooded American would do. I started kicking the machine. Kicking hard. Kicking obsessively. Until my toes started to hurt.

I stood for a long moment in the rain, letting it pour down on me, feeling as if I were melting like a wax statue in the hot sun. I became one with the drumming and thrumming and pounding of it all.

There was only one thing I could do now.

I took off running back to the car. To Laura. And the man with the gun.

I broke into a crazy grin when I saw the car. I could see Laura's profile in the gloom. She was still alive.

I reached the driver's door, opened it up, and pitched myself inside.

"My God, what happened to you?" Laura said. "Did somebody beat you up?"

The man with the gun was a little less sympathetic. "Where the hell's the money?"

I decided to answer both questions at once. "I couldn't remember my pin number so I had to stand there for a while. And then this guy—this black guy—he came out of nowhere and he had a gun and then he made me give him the money." I looked back at the man with the gun. "I couldn't help it. I told him that you had first dibs on the money but he didn't care."

"You expect me to believe that crap?"

"Honest to God. That's what happened."

He looked at me and smiled. And then put the gun right up against Laura's head. "You want me to show you what's gonna happen here if you're not back in five minutes with the money?"

I looked at Laura. "God, honey, I'm telling the truth. About the guy with the gun."

"I know."

"I'm sorry." I glanced forlornly out the window at the rain filling the curbs. "I'll get the money. Somehow."

I opened the door again. And then noticed the white envelope still sitting on her lap. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you, sweetheart."

She was scared, that was easy enough to see, but she forced herself to focus and smile at me. "I love you, honey."

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"Get out of here and get that money," said the man with the gun.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"You heard what I said. Get going."

I reached over and took Laura's hand gently. "I'll get the money, sweetheart. I promise."

I got out of the car and started walking again. Then trotting. Then flat-out running. My head was still pounding with pain but I didn't care. I had to get the money. Somehow. Somewhere.

I didn't even know where I was going. I was just—running. It was better than standing still and contemplating what the guy with the gun might do.

I reached the corner and looked down the block where the ATM was located.

A car came from behind me, its headlights stabbing through the silver sheets of night rain. It moved on past me. When it came even with the lights of the ATM machine, it turned an abrupt left and headed for the machine.

Guy inside his car. Nice and warm and dry. Inserts his card, gets all the money he wants, and then drives on to do a lot of fun things with his nice and warm and dry evening.

While I stood out here in the soaking rain and—

Of course, I thought.

Of course.

There was only one thing I could do.

I started running, really running, splashing through puddles and tripping and nearly falling down. But nothing could stop me.

The bald man had parked too far away from the ATM to do his banking from the car. He backed up and gave it another try. He was concentrating on backing up so I didn't have much trouble opening the passenger door and slipping in.

"What the—" he started to say as he became aware of me.

"Stickup."

"What?"

"I'm robbing you."

"Oh, man, that's all I need. I've had a really crummy day today, mister," he said. "I knew I never should've come in this neighborhood but I was in a hurry and—"

"You want to hear about my bad day, mister? Huh?"

I raised the pocket of my raincoat, hoping he would think that I was pointing a gun at him.

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He looked down at my coat-draped fist and said, "You can't get a whole hell of a lotta money out of these ATM machines."

"You can get three hundred and that's good enough."

"What if I don't have three hundred?"

"New car. Nice new suit. Maybe twenty CDs in that box there. You've got three hundred. Easy."

"I work hard for my money."

"So do I."

"What if I told you I don't believe you've got a gun in there?"

"Then I'd say fine. And then I'd kill you."

"You don't look like a stickup guy."

"And you don't look like a guy who's stupid enough to get himself shot over three hundred dollars."

"I have to back up again. So I can get close."

"Back up. But go easy."

"Some birthday this is."

"It's your birthday?"

"Yeah. Ain't that a bitch?"

He backed up, pulled forward again, got right up next to the ATM, pulled out his card, and went to work.

The money came out with no problem. He handed it over to me.

"You have a pencil and paper?"

"What?"

"Something you can write with?"

"Oh. Yeah. Why?"

"I want you to write down your name and address."

"For what?"

"Because tomorrow morning I'm going to put three hundred dollars in an envelope and mail it to you."

"Are you some kind of crazy drug addict or what?"

"Just write down your name and address."

He shook his head. "Not only do I get robbed, I get robbed by some goddamned fruitcake."

But he wrote down his name and address, probably thinking I'd shoot him if he didn't.

"I appreciate the loan," I said, getting out of his car.

"Loan? You tell the cops it was a 'loan' and see what they say."

"Hope the rest of your day goes better," I said, and slammed the door.

And I hope the rest of my day goes better, too, I thought.

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* * *

"Good thing you got back here when you did," the man with the gun said. "I was just about to waste her."

"Spare me the macho crap, all right?" I said. I was getting cranky. The rain. The cold. The fear. And then having to commit a felony to get the cash I needed—and putting fear into a perfectly decent citizen who'd been having a very bad day himself.

I handed the money over to him. "Now you can go," I said.

He counted it in hard, harsh grunts, like a pig rutting in the mud.

"Three hundred. It was supposed to be four. Or five."

"I guess you'll just have to shoot us, then, huh?"

Laura gave me a frantic look and then dug her nails into my hands. Obviously, like the man I'd just left at the ATM, she thought I had lost what little of my senses I had left.

"I wouldn't push it, punk," the man with the gun said. "Because I just might shoot you yet."

He leaned forward from the backseat and said, "Lemme see your purse, babe."

Laura looked at me. I nodded. She handed him her purse.

More rutting sounds as he went through it.

"Twenty-six bucks?"

"I'm sorry," Laura said.

"Where're your credit cards?"

"We don't have credit cards. It's too tempting to use them. We're saving for a house."

"Ain't that sweet!"

He pitched the purse over the front seat and opened the back door.

Chill. Fog. Rain.

"You got a jerk for a husband, babe, I mean, just in case you haven't figured that out already."

Then he slammed the door and was gone.

"You were really going to tear it up?"

"Or let you tear it up. Whichever you preferred. I mean, I know you think I still have this thing for Chris but I really don't. I was going to prove it to you by showing you the letter tonight and letting you do whatever you wanted with it."

We were in bed, three hours after getting our car towed to a station, the tow truck giving us a ride home.

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The rain had quit an hour ago. Now there were just icy winds. But it was snug and warm in the bed of my one true love and icy winds didn't bother me at all.

"I'm sorry," I said, "about being so jealous."

"And I'm sorry about hiding the letter. It made you think I was going to take him up on his offer. But I really don't have any desire to see him at all."

Then we kind of just laid back and listened to the wind for a time.

And she started getting affectionate, her foot rubbing my foot, her hand taking my hand.

And then in the darkness, she said, "Would you like to make love?"

"Would I?" I laughed. "Would I?"

And then I rolled over and we began kissing and then I began running my fingers through her long dark hair and then I suddenly realized that—

"What's wrong?" she said, as I rolled away from her, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling.

"Let's just go to sleep."

"God, honey, I want to know what's going on. Here we are making out and then all of a sudden you stop."

"Oh God," I said. "What a day this has been." I sighed and prepared myself for the ultimate in manly humiliation. "Remember that time when Rick's sister got married?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I got real drunk?"

"Uh-huh."

"And that night we tried—well, we tried to make love but I couldn't?"

"Uh-huh." She was silent a long moment. Then, "Oh God, you mean, the same thing happened to you just now?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

"The perfect ending to the perfect day," I said.

"First you find that letter from Chris—"

"And then I can't concentrate on my job—"

"And then Ms. Sanders threatens to fire you—"

"And then a man sticks us up—"

"And then you have to stick up another man—"

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"And then we come home and go to bed and—" I sighed. "I think I'll just roll over and go to sleep."

"Good idea, honey. That's what we both need. A good night's sleep."

"I love you, sweetheart," I said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to . . . well, you know."

"It's fine, sweetie. It happens to every man once in a while."

"It's just one of those days," I said.

"And one of those nights," she said.

But you know what? Some time later the grandfather clock in the living room woke me as it tolled twelve midnight, and when I rolled over to see how Laura was doing, she was wide awake and took me in her sweet warm arms, and I didn't have any trouble at all showing her how grateful I was.

It was a brand-new day . . . and when I finally got around to breakfast, the first thing I did was lift the horoscope section from the paper . . . and drop it, unread, into the wastebasket.

No more snooping in drawers . . . and no more bad-luck horoscopes. ●

"On the other hand, how many other dungeons do you know with Muzak?"

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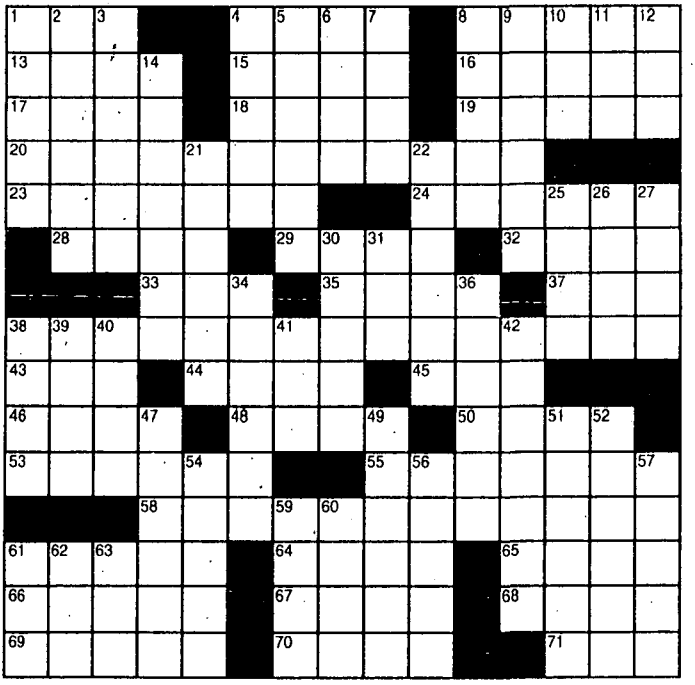
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Fowl Mystery

by Ruth Minary



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60 —— *La Douce,* Shirley MacLaine film
61 Home of *Murder She Wrote*
62 Farm implement
63 Alder tree, Scot.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

CRAZY BIRD

by Dorothy B. Davis

For her second published fiction, New York City resident Dorothy Davis takes us to the beautiful northerly regions of New York State. But as the city dweller in her story discovers, there can be as much danger in the wilder regions of the Adirondacks as on city streets. Ms. Davis makes her living as an editor.

All righty! I'm gonna take a chance and open my door and see what's out there. I jest hope it ain't Crazy Bird.

Whooo-eee! What a storm! Snow's coming down like dumptrucks was unloading it!

Hey, what've we got here? A lump of person on my doorstep. Nearly buried in the snow! Hey, you still alive, stranger?

Aw. He can make noises! He's still with us. Well . . . good! He don't look like Crazy Bird to me. Of course, my eyesight ain't what it used to be.

Listen, stranger, you got a choice. You want to jump on out of this blizzard and into my house, or die of the cold out here?

That a nod? You want to come into my house?

All righty, my friend, come on this-a-way. Towards the light! Come on! That's it! How in blazes did you get through my woods in this weather?

What's that?

Aw, it's all right. Don't mention it.

Don't be all day about it though, it's cold out here; we're jest like two petunias in the Arctic.

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All righty. Jest another goldarn minute now. Let me close this door. Oof! Wind's blowing in. Too strong for me! Can you give me a shove with it, stranger?

Thank you. Now, jest let me shoot this bolt back in. And lock it with my key. There. Whoosh! Cold as a freezer out there, but kinda like an icebox in here. Well, take your pick.

You choose to stay in here? Well, you didn't exactly catch my drift. I meant take your pick, as in "ice pick."

Aw, don't look at me like that with those big scaredy-cat eyes. I'm jest joking, you'll get used to me.

Lucky I finally heard you anyway.

You say you was pounding on my door and kicking it at least an hour before I opened it?

And all that time I was setting in here thinking it was jest my old oak trees knocking on my roof like they always do when a storm gets into them. And when I finally figured out where the noise was coming from, I was scared to open my door in case I might be letting in . . . CRAZY BIRD!

He's a dangerous one is who he is. I'll tell you all about him once I get you settled.

Come on now, down this hall to where it's cozy. Before you freeze to death out here. Come on, my friend, don't stand on ceremony.

Your feet are froze? You can hardly stand on *them!* Well, in that case, lean on me, and somehow or the other the two of us'll make it down the hall, step by step together. What's your name, stranger?

Pleased to meet you, Harry. I'm Connor. Here we are now! Okay, Harry, now jest let me help you out of your coat.

Why, it's jest a raincoat, ain't it? There ain't even no lining in it!

Stop your worrying, Harry. I ain't stealing it. I'm jest hanging it up on this old clothes tree of mine, here by my back hall.

Yeah, it's deer antlers. My grandpaw made it. He dug them right out of the deer's skull.

Sure, with his big hunting knife. I always carry it with me, here on my belt. See? Sharp, ain't it? Hey, what's the matter with you, Harry?

Nothing? Funny, you sure look like it is.

Okay, I've sheathed it again. You can open your eyes now. Okay, Harry, step right on over here to my hot seat, right by my roaring fire.

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Big, ain't it? And it's burning real good and smooth and even in there. No snap, crackle, and pop to my fires! Now, you jest settle yourself down in this big old overstuffed chair of mine, right here close in by the fire. AND YOU AIN'T GONNA GET OUT OF IT AGAIN, HARRY, till spring's really sprung!

Aw, what's the matter? I jest meant you ain't gonna want to get out of that chair till it's warm again outside, 'cause it's so comfortable! Now, let me help you pull your boots off.

Okay, okay. I'll be more careful. Errrf. Errrf. There! Well, I'll be, jest look at this fancy stitching, will you? These must be real expensive, Harry. 'Course, they'll need a good working over with saddle soap once they get dried out. Hey, they ain't lined, neither. These are more spring than winter boots, these are!

Aw, you wasn't expecting a sudden snowfall?

Not in April?

Well, you must not be from around here. You from the city?

Jest a lucky stab in the dark. Well, let me tell you a thing or two, Harry my friend. You got to expect these sudden snows around here. Till . . . July, at the very least.

'Cause this here is the Adirondacks. The North Country. Why, up on our peaks the white stuff comes down the whole year round. Golly, these boots sure are beauties. They're gonna look mighty good on me!

Jest joking again, Harry. You'll get used to it. Now, if you'll bear with me a minute, I'll jest put your boots down the end of my back hall here.

To my mud room. Where I always keep boots. Okay by you?

Yeah, this old house of mine still has a mud room. It's a big old house, it is. Been in my family for generations.

Along with the woods.

That's where you got lost? What was you out there in my woods for, anyway, Harry, in the middle of the night? You ain't that pesty out-of-town developer who's been trying to get my property, is you?

Aw, you don't know anything about that. You was jest out for a walk in the country, when this storm broke out unexpected-like and you couldn't find your way back to your car. And then you saw my house all lit up like Christmas.

That's some kind of luck, that is!

But why was you doing your walking around up here?

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You're thinking of buying a vacation place in the area? You mean one of them flimsy summer houses that are springing up around here like toadstools after a rainstorm, displacing all the animals?

Yeah? Now, what would you want to do that for?

You like to be where it's wild? Well, you come to the right place then, Harry, but I don't know about roundabouts. Why, with all the new houses going up, the deer are starting to look like lawn ornaments.

Aw, and you think it's safe to live in these parts, where there's no need even to lock your—

Yeah, I did bolt my door, Harry, and lock it. I used a key.

You don't look so good all of a sudden. You better put your feet up on this here ottoman. That's it! Burn those toesies. Get that frostbite clear out of them.

Good. Now I'll cover you up to your chinny-chin-chin with this here afghan.

Thanks. It's real special to me. My maw made it.

Aw, forgive me, Harry. Now I'm having my own sudden storm. Here I am crying like an old woman. Even got to get out my handkerchief.

Aw, that blood on my handkerchief, it was jest a nosebleed, Harry. Maw died sudden-like when I was real young. Left me all alone. She sure did do beautiful work. That afghan of hers is a pure work of art!

I'll be better in a minute now.

Whew. Now that squall of mine's over with, let's see. How're you doing, Harry?

Why, Harry, your teeth are chattering! And I thought for sure you'd be warm by now. You know what? I think we both could use a nice hot cup of tea right about now. Sound good to you?

Good. I hoped it would. In fact, I already got the kettle on the boil.

That reminds you, you got to use the phone? Sorry, but you can't, Harry. Darned thing went out in the storm.

Yeah, still got my lights.

Aw, well, that's 'cause I got me a generator, Mr. Smarty-Pants!

So, if you don't call your wife she'll worry? Come on, Harry. You mean she'll fret about a bum like you?

Jest joking again. You sure is quick to take the bait!

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Well, she'll just have to fret. Nothing can move through a storm like this one. But what are wives for anyway?

Naw. I never could get me one.

That's right. I don't have no wife. No friends, neither.

You never would've guessed it? Well, it don't matter anyway. Sometimes I do get lonely, though which is why I'm glad you stopped by. I got so much to tell you about, Harry. . . .

What's that?

Tea first!

Yeah. I was almost forgetting about it. Okay, here I go now.

Hey, Harry-in-there, you know what? I think we both of us deserve a little something in our tea, don't you? Something rum or brandylike and strong. To scare away the chills. Keep you from getting your death of cold. You agree?

Good, pardner! I'm dolloping it out in the cups right now.

Okay, Harry, here's your nice hot toddy tea. . . . Why Harry, your hand's a little shaky! Aw, I'll jest put the cup right down here for you on this doily.

You know, Harry, you might as well face the fact you're stuck here for the whole night, with me for company. You ain't going nowhere in that storm out there. Why, jest listen to that saxy wind wail! And you can't see out them jitterbugging windows neither for the snow drifts. 'Course, it'll probably all be gone by the time you leave here.

So what about we drink to each other with our special toddy tea. Okay?

Good! Here's to you, Harry.

Hey, let's drink to tonight. To NIGHT! SKULL!

Aw, it's Swedish, I think. You know, Harry, I hope you'll like these stories I'm going to tell you.

Crazy Bird's in them. He's the star of them and they're about death. Harry, I hope that's not too strong for you?

It's not? You like murder stories? Naw, I meant your tea! I was hoping your tea wasn't too strong for you.

Good. So now you jest make yourself comfortable there—your feet up to the fire, my maw's afghan covering you up like a blanket of grass and flowers, the tea I made especially for you, with a little kicker in it, heating up your insides—and you jest listen to me tell you my tales.

It all started back in the winter of '37. In the days when winter was winter, and the cold, cruel old man settled in early and

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overstayed his welcome by several months. When one day you'd be slogging and sloshing through wet brown leaves piled in layers all atop each other like soggy cornflakes in the bottom of your bowl, and, say, a furry gray squirrel might be scampering along the furrowed branches of an elm tree, the vibrant yellow-leaved boughs making a shiny backdrop, and beyond them the watery blue-gray sky, and then the squirrel might pop down into its hole atop the tree trunk, as though he was getting ready for something we didn't care to think about, didn't yet sense with our merely human senses. And it seemed like only the next day down would come the snow, like it is tonight, dumptruck style, until, by the next morning, it'd be nearly knee-high to a twelve-year-old, which is what I was at that time, and be clinging like shaving cream to all the bushes and trees.

So one day that winter, Paw and me were out making our rounds on our property, in our heavy jackets and sturdy winter boots. We had our guns with us, and we was shooting anything that moved—crows, squirrels, chickadees, raccoons, rabbits, deer. . . . And once we hit an animal we'd leave it where it lay, bleeding in the snow, jest for the fun of it. For Paw's fun, that was, not mine. He forced me to do it. I never, never would've done it otherwise, for I love all animals. Especially them big crows, so sleek and shiny and smart! Aw, Paw was a cruel man. And cruel to me. Forever hitting me, or kicking me, or even hauling off with both fists and beating me. And for no reason at all except he took pleasure in doing it. If I missed a target, for example, he'd sock me in the jaw for missing what he'd call an easy shot. 'Course, he missed most of his shots too, drunk as he usually was. But I couldn't say a thing about his lousy aim, or he'd deck me again. So out there with him in the woods I was scared, like I always was when I was with him. Never knowing what he'd take it into his head to do next.

Now, Crazy Bird lived in those woods too, and he blasted the heck out of everything in sight when he was in a mood to. So Paw and me knew we had to be careful of him. Anyway, one day we heard all this blasting coming from jest off the path leading to Ridley Pond, and when we got there we came upon a man lying dead, face up in the snow. And the dead man was Crazy Bird! He'd been shot three times through the chest. You could see the holes through his jacket. And he was lying in a puddle of his own blood! Well, this was a shock to the two of us, but

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especially to me, since I was so young. But I didn't want to let on to Paw that it was, of course. I wanted to appear to be a big man in front of him. So, since there was nothing that could be done, I went back to call the authorities while he stood guard.

Well, what with one thing and the other, it was almost two hours before Sheriff Clem and his deputy and me arrived back at the scene. But when we got there, Crazy Bird was gone. And in his place lay Paw! Shot through his chest two, three times, with holes through his jacket too, and lying in a pool of his own blood, jest like Crazy Bird had.

No need to tell you, this sure looked bad for me. Since all they had was my word that it had been Crazy Bird there in the snow before. "Now, Sheriff Clem," I said. "I know this looks bad for me, sir, but why would I lead you to the scene of my own crime?"

"To make it look like you didn't do it, of course," he replied, steady as spit.

"I'm innocent, I tell you. Crazy Bird must've done it!"

"Thought you told me Crazy Bird was dead," said the sheriff.

"He must've been faking it. Setting us up. Waiting here until I left, and then jumping up to kill Paw!"

"Or maybe," said Sheriff Clem, helpful-like, "someone else was lurking around here too. The one who shot Crazy Bird maybe?"

"It could've happened that way too," I said. "But the way I see it, Crazy Bird is the more likely culprit."

"Well then, if either one of these things is the case," said Sheriff Clem, "why don't you jest tell me where the footprints are? And where's the bloody trail of Crazy Bird being pulled away from here? Snow's as smooth as glass clear around. Except of course for the tracks of you and your Paw. And his end here, where he fell dead. And yours go right on up to him and then veer off toward your house. Now, if Crazy Bird was here, like you say he was, how'd he get away? Fly off in the sky?"

"That's right," I said. "That's what he must've done. Sure he can fly!"

Well, Sheriff Clem jest stared at me then. Now, them marks in the snow was indecipherable to me at first. But then I saw that what he said was true. Two sets led up to where Paw lay, and only one track led away. And that one track was mine. "Well, maybe Crazy Bird jest hopped from one of my footprints to the other, and that way he didn't leave no prints of his own."

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"Well then, he must have mighty tiny feet for a grownup," said Sheriff Clem.

Well, Sheriff Clem didn't put no stock in my stories about Crazy Bird. Naw, he said that, unlike some people he could mention, snow didn't tell no lies. He never even bothered to look for Crazy Bird. So Crazy Bird stayed on the loose, ready to do mischief again. While I was tried as a juvenile. But the court couldn't find me guilty, as hard as they tried. They jest didn't have enough evidence. It was all too circumstantial. For one thing, they never did find that gun. Still, nobody believed me, and they didn't believe me about Crazy Bird, neither. I wondered where he'd flown off to. It jest wasn't fair. He was scot-free right away to do mischief again. And I worried about what he might do next.

And he struck again soon enough. The following spring he got my maw! She had found the gun that killed Paw, you see, in her flower box, and it turned out to be mine, and she jest couldn't believe that Crazy Bird was the one who had used it on Paw. Naw, she wanted to see me put away. I'd thought she'd be glad Paw was gone, 'cause he'd beaten her too. But she wanted me gone too. And me her own son. But she never got the chance to turn me in, anyway, 'cause the next morning, she took violent sick and died in the hospital before the week was out. And I guess if she said anything about me there, it must've jest sounded like she was raving.

Now at lunch and dinner the day before she got sick, she'd eaten a big stew she'd made for herself that had lots of mushrooms in it she'd gathered from the woods. And somehow some death angels had gotten mixed in there, from the deadly amanita family. It was a wonder how they got in there, for Maw was wise to poisons. But she jest wasn't wise enough to the ways of Crazy Bird, I guess.

You can't tell toadstools by the taste, Harry. I never eat mushrooms but I'm told toadstools are jest as pleasing as good mushrooms is. And it's only later, when the room starts spinning around . . .

Aw, come on. It's probably jest in your mind, Harry! It's tea what was filling up that cup, not poison mushrooms! You sure is a nervous sort, ain't you, Harry?

So, anyway, when Sheriff Clem got called in again, the day Maw got taken away, he was suspicious of me all over again.

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Even when I showed him the footprints I'd found outside leading into the kitchen, right up to the stove, and back out again.

But once again, there wasn't sufficient evidence to find me guilty, or even to hold me, and I went free. There was always the possibility, you see, that Maw had made a mistake in what she'd gathered. But most folks around here didn't buy that. Naw, I'm afraid they thought I'd poisoned my own maw! I combed the woods with Paw's rifle, searching for Crazy Bird. But I never came across so much as another footprint of his. Aw, he is clever, he is! You didn't happen to come across him when you was outside there, Harry, did you?

Naw, I didn't think so. Nobody ever sees him coming till it's too late. Not even me.

Well, in the opinion of the law, I was too young to live alone. So my Aunt Barb and Uncle Bert, on Paw's side, came to live with me here in this house. They'd jest been tenants elsewhere, so they was glad to come. But they was even meaner than Paw had been. I tried to make the best of it, figuring I had only a few years to go to legal manhood, when I'd be rid of them. But when I was nearly sixteen, I woke in the middle of the night and overheard them talking, right here in this very room. And they was talking with none other than Crazy Bird hisself! And what they was discussing was a plot to kill me, as I lay sleeping—so they could get their hands on my house and my land. Jest like that out-of-town developer wants to do now, Harry! Believe me, I was scared.

What's the matter, Harry? I thought you said you liked murder stories?

All righty, so, to continue, I didn't sleep another wink that night, wondering what I was going to do. I decided I'd better make a run for it at the first opportunity. But, as it turned out, Crazy Bird must've jest been pretending to be on their side. Because the very next night, Crazy Bird took Grandpaw's hunting knife—

What's wrong, Harry?

Anyway, he took this here knife, and he slashed both their throats with it, from ear to ear. Like this! While they was asleep! Then he disappeared again!

Me? Aw, I was away when it happened. I'd run off that day to my friend Jeb, the next town over. Jeb swore for me that I was with him, so I got clear again. This time I sought out Crazy

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Bird to thank him. But once again he was nowhere to be found. He chooses when to show hisself. I jest can't control him!

What's that? You should learn to speak up, Harry.

Naw, no one believed that story, neither. That's why no one comes around here. Except people who don't know no better, like you, Harry. People who get lost in the woods, see my lights. And when they get here, they bring Crazy Bird back again. It's like he jest lays in wait for them or something.

That's right, Harry. He jumps out at me when I least expect it. I got to watch out for him all the time. I had to watch out for him when I opened the front door to you. You didn't see him come in, did you, Harry?

Naw, I didn't think you did.

But somehow he's gotten in here with us anyway. And he jumped out at me when I was least expecting him to.

Why, out there in the kitchen, when I was fixing you your tea.

He told me the brandy was jest to hide the taste of the strange leaves he concocted it out of, that he found in my kitchen cupboard, next to my sink.

Why the dried leaves of the foxglove flower. Digitalis purpurea. Grows out back here in July.

You're feeling ill now, Harry?

Well, it's better than dying in a blizzard. You had your choice, you know. I asked you if it was okay with you, before I brought you in here.

Aw, come on, you're not all that young! You're awful ANXIOUS, Harry, if you ask me.

Well, I'll be! You're right! There goes my telephone. Yeah, it's in my kitchen. Must be the electric company calling. The lines must be fixed now.

Well, so what if it's still snowing and blowing outside like a high-speed fan in a chicken coop, and these windows look like they're drowning in the feathers?

Okay, okay, so the phone never went out, Harry, and okay, so somebody is calling me on it. You didn't think I had any friends? Well, if you must know, Harry, it's my oldest son, George. He calls me every night to check up on me. Ever since Pandora died, he worries about me.

Pandora was my wife . . . of fifty years. And she was great at making afghans. Doilies too.

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Okay, so I was married. No, Harry, my maw didn't die when I was twelve. She lived to be seventy-eight.

So I lied, Harry!

Aw, you're not sure what to believe now? Well, why don't you get up and answer the phone and see for yourself?

You feel too wobbly? Figures. The paralysis from the tea must be settling in your toes.

Well, if you'll excuse me, Harry, I don't want to worry my son more than I got to.

Hello? . . . Jeb? How are you, old pal? . . . Can't talk now. Yeah, that's right! Yeah, he swallowed it. Dinner tomorrow at three, same as usual. Carry on! Bye-bye, Jeb.

Yeah, Harry, that was my son George.

Jeb . . . George. What's the difference? So I lie about some things, Harry. You gotta get used to it!

Yeah, right, Jeb's the one who gave me my alibi the last murder I told you about.

Well, yeah, maybe there's been others. I get visitors, I told you.

Aw, so you don't think it's that I'm kidding? You think I'm . . . crazy! Me, Harry? Naw.

Why, Harry, you're all pale and sweaty. You wonderin' what the truth is about Paw and Maw and Aunt Barb and Uncle Bert?

Well, before I tell you, I'll tell you something else, Harry, about them deer antlers that your coat's hanging on. That old deer laid his antlers right down there on the ground, jest so my grandpaw could pick them up and make a nice coat rack out of them. He didn't have to use his knife at all!

I didn't think you'd believe that one, Harry. Well that story happens to be jest as true as the fact that your tea is jest plain tea. So why don't you take another sip of it and see?

You're scared to? . . . Well then . . . I GOTCHA, HARRY! I GOTCHA! And guess what, Harry, the best part is—you didn't fool me first. Looky here what old Connor found in your coat pocket, Harry. A gun! That's why you didn't want me to take your coat away from you before, wasn't it? And look what else I found in there. A copy of a back-dated deed to my house and property, signing it all over to Cain Development Company. Forged with my signature! So you ARE the guy who's been trying to get my land offa me. I thought you was, Harry. Jeb got suspicious too when he seen you get outta your car this evening. He

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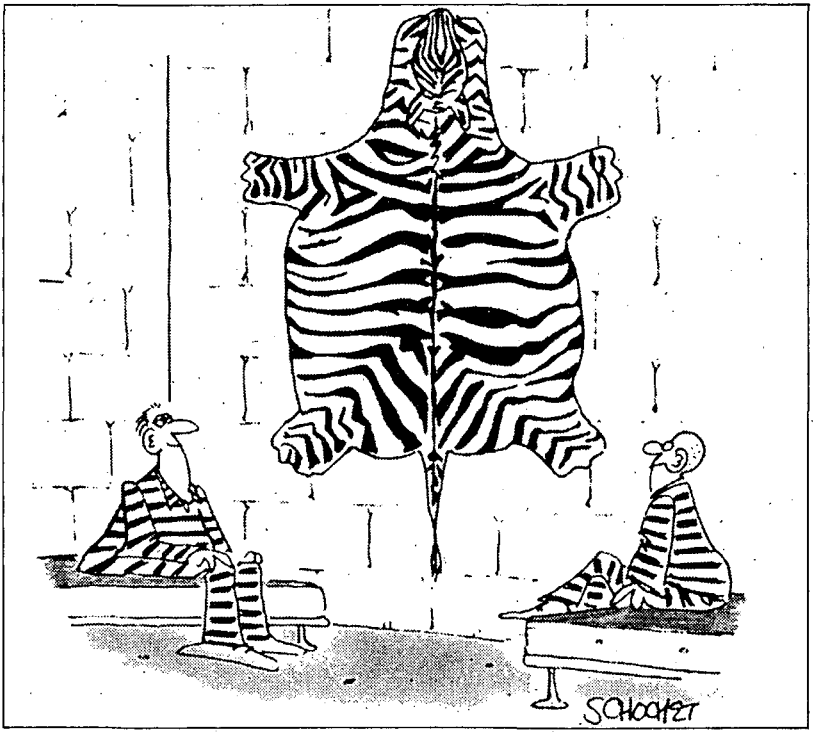
called me before you got here. Who else'd be sneaking around out here on all these acres at this time of night anyway, with snow starting to fall? But you didn't get me after all, Harry. I got you!

Hey, Harry, what's the matter with you now? I don't think you heard a word I jest said. Why, you're shaking as bad as them windows is and . . . Hey, Harry, don't you get it? You wouldn't drink your tea, so I said GOTCHA!

Harry?

Harry?

Well, I'll be . . . ! Aw, Harry, what'd you go and die now for? Spoiling all the fun we was gonna have. I was jest joking. I said gotcha 'cause I fooled you into not drinking any more of your tea, even though it was jest plain tea, Harry. Whoo-eee! That old Crazy Bird has gone and scared you to death. I tried to keep him out, but HE GOTCHA, HARRY! ●



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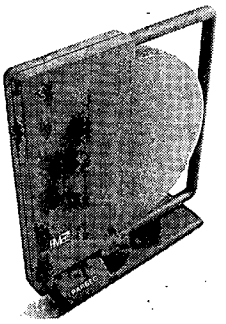

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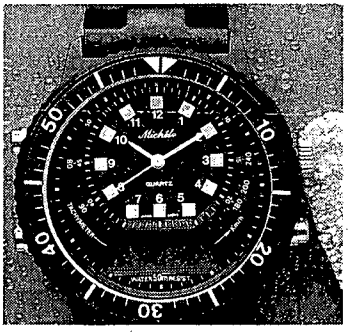

The Diver's Watch, priced under $50, is rated waterproof to 5 atmospheres (over 150'). The movable bezel, case and band are all "black chrome" plated in a rugged matte finish. Two sunken faces provide fully independent digital analog time-keeping, so you can set one face to home time and one to travel time. Date, day and month display; alarm; 1/100 second chronograph with lap timer; choice of hourly chime, 12 or 24-hour format. Precision Japanese movement. 1-yr. warranty. $39.98 ($5.50) #A1490.

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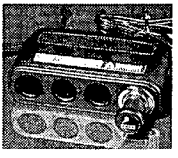

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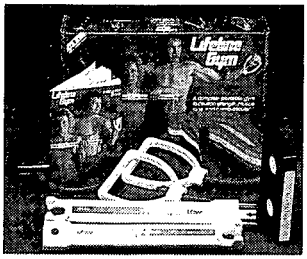

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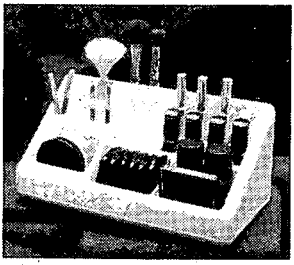

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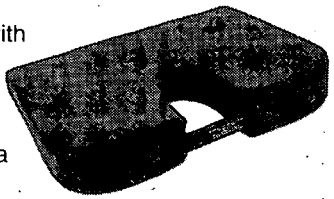

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Art by Gabriella Dellosso

THE FLOWERPRINT MURDER

by Janwillem van de Wetering

Deputy Sheriff Champlain sat back on the deck he'd built off his trailer and watched the sunrise. The first of the chickadees began to flit between Champlain's feeders, some set on posts, some hanging from nearby trees. The birds' cheerful, simple little songs counterpointed the memory of cacophonies that drove Champlain from a comfortable bed to exposure beneath cold, fading stars. Gunfire had been in the dream, and the ground around him erupting from incoming grenades. There were the screams of platoon mates as they fell around him. And all the while medic Champlain walked calmly, upright, unscathed beneath his Red Cross helmet, to return safely while

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his buddies died. The dream was based on real, random survival. Champlain should not be alive now. The Viet Cong liked to aim at medics first.

Other birds joined the friendly chickadees. Purple finches, a small tribe of juncos, a pair of song sparrows chased by blue jays kept returning. The cries of the jays mixed with the smaller birds' chirping created a not unpleasing medley that lulled the deputy into a doze that lasted a good two hours, then was shattered when his phone rang inside the trailer.

He got up from his hard cane couch, stretched, went inside. "Yeah?"

"Rise and shine, Champ."

It was Sheriff Sipock. Champlain was supposed to be on early duty that spring day, to relieve Sipock, who would be off to breakfast in the kitchen adjoining his office.

"You up, Champ?"

"Aimlessly afloat in an empty universe," Champlain said. "Sorry." His eyes scanned the spotless interior of the trailer. Even his unmade bed, the sheets folded back with mathematical precision, looked neat. It was hard to reconcile his orderly bachelor lodgings with the recurring dream's violent chaos. "Anything up?"

"You ain't missed much so far," said Sipock. "You think you might be coming now, Old Buddy? Not feeling bad again?"

"Dreams," Champlain said. "But I'm up and about now."

"Share an omelet?" the sheriff asked. "Like the one you cook? With spinach? Kiwis and cream to follow?"

"Kiwis?" Champlain held the phone at some distance.

The start of a new series from Janwillem van de Wetering this month, featuring Deputy Sheriff Christof Champlain. Mr. van de Wetering plans to alternate stories about his spiritually enlightened recluse Jannie (see *EQMM* 2/95 and 5/95) with this new Champlain series, set in his own neck of the woods in Maine. The author settled in Maine in the late seventies and has developed a keen understanding of the place and its people. ✝

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"Don't rightly know what kiwis might be," Sipock admitted. He chuckled. "Live and learn. There was a *New Yorker* cartoon in Dentist Cary's office showing a sign in a restaurant window that said: 'Will not serve kiwis.' A fruit of some sort?"

"Pippy and sour," Champlain said. "Acquired taste. Join you in a minute. Betty isn't home for the weekend?"

"Betty," Sipock said. "Would that be some sort of woman?"

"On my way," Champlain said. He was dressing as he talked. He and Sipock went back a few years now, helping to maintain harmony along the wild coast and within the wetlands of Woodcock County, Maine. Betty Sipock, the sheriff's wayward wife, no longer cared for "the desolation." Betty would go off to work in her Bostonian sister's Fusion Dance Studio and attend spiritual workshops where she met men who shared. Betty wasn't home too often now.

Champlain knew Sipock's tone of voice, and its subtle fluctuations. Listening to his superior's grating, wheezy words, he reckoned something had happened, nothing serious though. Sheriff Sipock wouldn't normally call his deputy if the latter was late.

"Nothing is up?" Champlain asked. "It's too early, right? Too Sunday?"

"Just Preacher Pooter on the blower," Sipock said. "Old buzzard has been doing his rounds, as always on Lordy days, waving the Holy Book, and Christina LaCroix won't open the door of her cabin on Neck Road. Pooter has been hollering and kicking and whistling. No go. Mind checking with Christina on your way up? Pooter sounded kinda worried. Hard to get him off the phone. I would go, but Tom hasn't showed yet."

Tom was Woodcock County's part-time dispatcher, part-time homesteader, not too punctual an official either.

"Old Miss LaCroix?" Champlain asked, putting on his gunbelt. "Isn't she one of the believers? Why wouldn't she let Preacher Pooter in?"

"Some believe opposite," Sipock said. "Maybe Preach gets a little too pushy?"

Keith Jarrett's Cologne Concert sounded from the cruiser's tapeplayer as Champlain, driving south on Narberry Neck Road, followed the county's spectacular shore. The deputy, lips pursed, head slightly to the side, enjoyed the music as he glanced at white breakers rolling along a purple granite ledge. He passed several small coves where winter ducks still dived for mussels

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before turning the cruiser into Christina LaCroix's driveway. The driveway was marked with low walls of fieldstones, partly overgrown with dry silver moss. He parked behind the old lady's rustbucket Oldsmobile. He smiled. He could imagine the indignant rage it would kindle in Pooter to be ignored by rightful prey. Champlain had been treated to Pooter's visitations too, once while he was renovating his trailer, just after he bought it, when it still showed signs of psychopathic occupation. After fixing the outside, he'd torn out all partitions and was burning scrap when the white-bearded man with long stringy hair approached from the fire's off-side. Pooter could pass for an Old Testament apparition, certainly that time. One vengeful prophet, framed by flames.

"Saw the fumes and knew it must be one of God's lost lambs smoking," Pooter hollered, holding up a large tattered Bible and shaking a poplar branch.

Champlain, from his days in New York's Greenwich Village, had some experience in dealing with the savior fringe. He threw out his arms. "I've been *waiting.*" He pointed at glowing coals. "Step right up, step right *UP.*"

Pooter, shaken from his routine by Champlain dancing toward him, changed modes. Coastal cynicism overcame Puritan ideals. "Maryjane?" Pooter asked pleasantly. "Any good grass to spare, me lad?"

"The weed," Champlain said, "no longer works for me."

Pooter stuck his staff in the ground, skipped around the fire, and peered into Champlain's face. "Ain't you Pete Champlain's boy?" He prodded the deputy's chest. "Yes, I see the likeness. You must be what became of little Christof." He shook his Bible in Champlain's face. "Weren't you the one who played with cut-out dolls as a kid? Got your father all worried?" Pooter caressed his beard, shaking his head. "Sorry to hear what happened to the old ones." Pooter scowled. "I dunno, me lad, even if ye're both real old, even if ye're both real sick, faith will prevail." He dropped his voice. "A handgun, was it?"

Champlain shrugged.

Pooter preached then, after stepping behind flames again. "Let us purify ourselves, leave the Sodom of our minds."

Champlain, using a long-stemmed spade, stirred the fire. He thought of Vietnamese Buddhist monks pouring gasoline on

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their heads, then burning while they sat, their legs locked in the lotus position.

Pooter prayed, then lifted his torn straw hat.

"Blessings, dear." He smiled kindly. "You back for good? Had enough of city sin?"

"Yes," Champlain said sincerely. There was some contact between them then, kept up through the years by wobbled eyebrows when their cars met on the road between Sorry and Rotworth. As Sheriff Sipock said: "No reason to be rude. We're all mad anyway."

As he walked to the cabin's front door, Champlain looked to see if there was smoke coming out of Christina's brick chimney. There wasn't any, but on a nice spring morning like this the old lady might well have let the fire die. He knocked. While waiting, he admired forsythia bushes flanking the front door. The yellow flowers were bright and cheery. He knocked again, calling Christina's name, identifying himself so she'd know he wasn't the dreaded Pooter. "Sheriff's office. How are you doing, Miz LaCroix?"

The cabin just sat there. The deputy, neatly uniformed, boots and gunbelt creaking, his Stetson set at the prescribed police-school angle, walked around the building to where Christina was starting her vegetable garden for the season. Nothing to be alarmed about, he thought. Friends probably picked the old thing up for church, Humanitarian Chapel most likely. The ladies might be planning to have lunch afterward, at the Lighthouse Inn, looking across the channel toward Ropeshoe Island. Hope to see a finback whale cruise by. Drink decaf from pink porcelain cups. Eat blueberry pancakes. The Sunday outing.

Champlain wondered what Pooter could be upset about. Was this an instance of the prophet's uncanny insight?

Looking across junipers growing along Christina's property line, he noticed a small bright-green car sitting behind the house of Christina's neighbor. The deputy recalled Mr. Bollinger was a live-alone too. He briefly visualized the image of Clarence Bollinger, a small, dainty man who owned the health food store in nearby Sorry. Champlain had met Bollinger at Sorry Post Office, where the store owner, talking about the deficit with the postmaster and fellow clients, claimed to be a buy-American man. Earlier on, when Champlain came back from Viet Nam in a bemedaled uniform, Clarence had stepped forward on Main

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Street and doffed his hat. "We're proud of you, young man. I want you to know that."

Must be lightening up a bit, thought Champlain. The little green car was a Subaru, a "tin roller skate," as Bollinger had called Japanese imports. Champlain didn't recall ever having seen Bollinger drive the compact. As far as he knew, Clarence drove a Dodge full-size pickup.

Champlain drove to work, after stopping at the Sorry General Store.

"Morning," Sheriff Sipock said. He smiled at a paper bag filled with omelet ingredients that Champlain carried in. Sipock, firmly stuck to his swivel chair, rolled across to the coffee machine in the near corner of his kitchen. "Don't strain yourself, Champ. I need the exercise. Java Mocha. Got it for you out of a catalogue. Kinda like it myself."

Champlain chuckled. The sheriff was the county's fat man. Sipock, locally known as Sixpack, managed his jurisdiction with less attention to law than to the remote area's peculiar sense of harmony and justice. For revenue Sipock preferred to use the summer people. "Caught myself three Volvos and a Mercedes speeding this week, now you bag us a bunch of BMWs, Champ." Winter was best spent sitting around the Franklin stove, sucking Cuban cigars donated by a Colombian skipper stuck on Hangman's Rock while watching ten tons of imports float off into the Atlantic.

Sipock mostly cared for Betty's goats, which Betty herself had long ago lost interest in. Sipock liked to milk the wily creatures. He sold the milk profitably to a Portland firm canning the product as part of an anti-allergy diet.

"I delegate crime, therefore I milk," he would tell Number One Goat Margarita. Crime detection was the deputy's realm. Crime, according to the sheriff, was city-inspired, best taken care of by experts. Champlain, after Viet Nam, had spent ten years in New York. "Besides," Sipock told Margarita, "being usefully engaged helps the young feller handle those interesting dreams.

"Besides," Sipock whispered into Margarita's downy ear, "why work if you don't have to?"

The sheriff now slid along on squeaky ball bearings and passed a steaming mug to Champlain. "You bring any frozen crew-sants?"

Champlain had brought oven-fresh biscuits.

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"How crude," Sipock said. "Here I'm trying to get educated. You talk to old lady LaCroix on the way?"

Champlain worked on the omelet. "Her car was there but she wasn't. I figure she got picked up by her sewing circle. Church time, you know."

Sipock interrupted his noisy swallowing, caused by watching the omelet rise. "Not holed up in her attic hiding from the hollering prophet?"

"I hollered too," Champlain said. "Not a sign of Christina. Preacher Pooter being cantankerous again? Causing trouble?"

Sipock tried to look away from the stove where Champlain's special mixture of vegetables and mushrooms simmered in a separate pot. "Maybe we ought to lean on Pooter a bit. Been driving that old pickup without a sticker for how long now? And his deer-chasing mutt without a tag? Growing maryjane behind his chapel?"

The phone rang. Champlain, having served the omelets, took the call. It was Clarence Bollinger wondering if the deputy sheriff was aware of any trouble at the LaCroix residence.

"Saw me, did you?" Champlain asked. "Christina didn't come to the door. You have any cause to worry, sir?" He pressed the phone's speaker button. Sipock, able to listen in now, grunted thanks.

Clarence Bollinger was, being a good neighbor, concerned about Christina not answering her door when he came over that morning after he saw the deputy leave. Bollinger explained that ever since former bank-teller Christina retired, he kept an eye on the old spinster. The day before, Saturday, on the phone, Christina mentioned not feeling too well. He had brought her some groceries. Her car was right there. He had phoned but she didn't pick up.

"Church?" Champlain asked. "Someone picked her up?"

"Could be," Bollinger said. "Yes, perhaps. There has been a lady calling on her lately, she said. Didn't see the lady myself. Could be. I'll see if she comes back."

"Let us know if she doesn't," Champlain said. "Thank you for reporting this, sir."

"Much afuss about nuffink," Sipock said when the deputy broke the connection. Sheriff Sipock wasn't worried enough not to eat his omelet. He persuaded Champlain to sit down and join him. "What are the mushrooms?"

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"You like them?" Champlain said, his fork raised.

Sipock looked dubious.

"Grew them in the trailer," Champlain said. "Dried them myself. I wanted to try them out on you. So they are good?"

Sipock shuddered.

Champlain laughed. "They're okay. Shitaki. A staple in Japan. Japanese are fussy eaters." He put mushrooms into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. "See?"

"Maybe," Sipock said, "Christina had cabin fever." He gestured as if warding off bad spirits. "What with the weather we been having? This morning it was nice for the first time in a week. Christina skipped church and went for a walk instead? On the beach? Walks sort of bent over, because of her bad backbone? She slipped off a boulder? You want to check that sometime, Champ?"

Champlain, half his omelet left and swallowed by Sipock the minute the cruiser's engine started up, returned to Neck Road. He noticed crows flying up and circling near the Neck's pebble beach. There was an eagle too, white tail and head clearly visible. "Seal," Champlain thought. He had seen a few lately. Dying or dead seals attract crows and eagles. He drove for another minute, then U-turned abruptly, drove back. During the war scavenger birds had often led him to missing soldiers. Champlain wasn't surprised now when he saw the grave, or what passed for a grave. The shallow hole might have been dug by hand, in a desperate hurry. Pebbles and small rocks were pushed across the body. Christina's arms stuck out. Her hands seemed to be beckoning the crows that hopped and fluttered close by. One shoulder was already exposed by digging birds. The flowerprint pattern on the dress, white and red roses on a yellow background, was stained with dried blood.

Champlain walked back to the cruiser and raised Sipock. Sipock raised the state police. A detective helicoptered in within hours and immediately fenced off the area with metal rods and yellow tape. Later a photographer arrived, a medical young lady from the capital's coroner's office, more state police, the county hearse, three reporters who, with other curious folks, were kept at a distance by Sipock and Champlain until volunteer constables from Sorry and Rotworth came to replace the sheriffs.

Preacher Pooter's beat-up white jeep, decorated with hand-painted black crosses, was spotted late that afternoon, almost

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in the next county, from the state-police helicopter, with Champlain pointing down. The chopper landed. "I'm doing Lordy work," Pooter said. "You can't bother me now."

The state detective was polite. "Just some questions, Mr. Pooter, sir. You called this morning; we're curious—the lady you called about is dead, you see, murdered."

Pooter denied all knowledge of beating Christina about the head with her own baseball bat (signed by Ted Williams; Christina claimed the signature was real, but it was printed, of course) kept behind her door for the last thirty years. The bat, blood-spattered, was found in the house. The handle had been wiped clean.

"You weren't in the house?"

"Never," Pooter said.

Christina's skull was broken in several places. The medical young lady thought the violence had been committed that very morning, early, daybreak maybe.

"Can we print your shoes?" the detective asked.

Pooter would not take off his shoes. He claimed an amendment. He became more and more upset.

"In that case, you'll have to come with me," the detective said gently.

"In that machine?" Pooter asked, aghast.

The old man was whisked off into the sky. Champlain drove the jeep back to Sorry.

Sipock was tending his goats when Champlain came back. The sheriff walked to the office. While coffee perked, Sipock theorized. "Got ourselves a killer?" He constructed a hypothesis while the deputy listened, making sure known facts fitted. "Look," Sipock said. "We know Pooter preys on the innocents Sundays and can get mighty obstreperous when thwarted. State detective ascertained that Pooter's shoeprints matched the prints left around victim's house. Suspect's guilty conscience made him nervous when you guys stopped him. Wouldn't have his shoes printed. Wasn't that suspicious? Fugitive was almost out of the county by the time officers tracked him down. Pooter is known for temper. Christina was wearing this newfangled non-Christian flowerprint dress. Pooter didn't like that. You should have heard him holler."

"Flowerprint dress?" Champlain asked. "You showed him the corpse just now?"

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"That flowerprint dress made Pooter extraordinarily anxious," Sipock said. "Called it a 'sinful outfit.' "

Sipock acted out the possible murder scene. Here is Preacher Pooter being let in by his sister in the faith, Christina LaCroix, on Neck Road, a woman he has known all his life, whom he went through school with. Pooter means well at first. Christina does believe, but not too rightly yet. There need to be some improvements, and Pooter is qualified to administer same, but now what happens? Christina claims that her mealy-mouthed, watered-down, slippery excuse for true faith is essentially superior to Pooter's fire and brimstone. Preacher Pooter is aghast. He grabs this flowerprinted sinner and yells there are neither eithers nor ors. Only Pooter's brand is guaranteed. Christina loses her temper, tries to shove the spiritual bully to the door. The baseball bat happens to be around. She picks it up. Pooter wrestles the weapon away from her.

"Right?" Sipock stopped in front of his deputy. Champlain noticed that the sheriff was sweating, trembling, panting. "Right, Champ?" Sipock bellowed.

Champlain pushed out his lower lip and waved his right hand, palm up. Sipock refused to acknowledge the mimed objection. Sipock moved his bulk around Champlain's chair, swinging the invisible murder weapon. "Bam bam BAM!"

The sheriff was panting. "Yes?"

"Nah," Champlain said.

The sheriff, out of breath, fell into his swivel chair.

"That's what the detective said." Sipock pointed at Champlain's seat. "He had Pooter right there, then let him go. No bail. Dropped Pooter off even, in a state cruiser. Promised you would return the jeep pronto." Sipock's heavy eyebrows curved lower. "You figure why the suspect was let go, Champ?"

"Pooter denies guilt," Champlain said. "No reason not to believe him. The footprints around the house mean nothing. Pooter said he walked around the cabin, when he phoned you. Remember? Can't hold a fellow citizen for not liking to take his shoes off."

"If you say so," Sipock said, shaking his head. *"If* you say so."

Champlain took pity on the sweating fat man. "What else happened, Sip?"

"Not much." Sipock shrugged. "More about that flowerprint dress. Hell and damnation. I thought Pooter would lose it. Man was frothing."

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"Pooter was never too stable," Champlain said.

Sipock snorted. "Mad as a rabid coon." He looked up. "You tired? Mind sniffing Pooter again? You got to return his jeep anyway. Give me a call when you're done sniffing. Provided Tom is back from feeding his chickens, I'll come pick you up."

"Sniffing Pooter for what?" Champlain asked.

Sheriff Sipock looked unhappy. "It's that flowerprint dress Christina wore that riles me. Riles Pooter too. There's something there. I *know* it."

Champlain found Pooter at the little chapel the preacher had built himself on the Neck Road. There was a sign: PREACHER POOTER'S NONDENOMINATIONAL CHURCH, and, in smaller letters, *all Protestants welcome*. The deputy found Pooter at the top of a ladder, prying a rotten board off the roof. The preacher threatened Champlain with his hammer. "Can't have my shoes again. You git. You hear?"

"Just returning your jeep," Champlain said. He pointed at the chapel's lopsided spire. "Nice design, you're truly artistic, Preach. Bless the Lord."

Pooter, mollified, holstered his hammer before climbing down.

"Wonder what Christina was doing on the beach today?" Champlain asked. "Collecting treasures?"

Pooter laughed grimly. "Water scared Chrissie silly. Could never get her skinnydipping when we was kids."

"What?" Champlain asked. *"Naked,* you mean? You and Christina? You suggested she take her clothes off?"

"Kids." Pooter held a hand a foot off the ground to indicate his and Christina's early sizes. "Before we knew no better."

"And she wouldn't go near water?"

"Hated the shore," Pooter said. "Scared her. Only lived there because she got the house off her folks." He scowled. "Must have dragged her there, Sheriff."

"Who, Preach?"

"Mr. Devil." Pooter almost reached for his hammer but seemed restrained by Champlain's uniform and gunbelt. "She surrendered herself." Pooter bent forward and whispered meaningfully, "Thou shalt not worship false gods, or in unbecoming attire."

"Flowerprint dress?" Champlain asked.

"Flowerprint dress," Pooter affirmed solemnly. "I told her what to do often enough. 'Don't cut your hair, go barefoot, wear

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long dark cloth. Repent. Bless your Sundays.' " He took a deep breath. "But NOOOOO!" Pooter's eyes bulged as he stared at Champlain. "So *then* what happens?"

Champlain stepped back. "You told her that, eh?"

"Again and again. Right in her own home. I'd come calling. Doing Lordy work. Talking my teeth down to the gums. Reclaiming the lost ones." The preacher glowered. "Doing my best, right until Mr. Devil claims her."

"But you didn't see her today?"

"Christina wasn't home," Pooter said. "Her car was. Strange, don't you think?" Pooter suddenly seemed quite normal. He offered the deputy cashew nuts from a can that he fetched from its hiding place behind the pulpit. He called in Nehemiah, a scarred pitbull terrier that sat up and grinned after touching Champlain's right hand respectfully with her paw. The two men discussed bird feeding and Pooter mentioned unusual birds that were coming round that spring. A cardinal. An oriole. Pooter and Champlain practiced birdcalls together.

"Amazing," Sheriff Sipock said, after picking Champlain up. "You have a gift there, Champ. You should try it on my goats sometime. Fancy getting Pooter to talk normal to you."

"Like Pooter has a second personality?" the young state detective asked after hearing Champlain's report next day. The detective had spent Sunday night and Monday morning checking the crime site and the grave. He had invited sheriff and deputy for dinner in the inn where he was staying. He addressed Sipock. "You grew up with Pooter. What was he like at school? Any bullying, beating up, displays of sadism?"

Sipock, slicing an oversize steak, shook his head.

"Pooter wasn't on the beach," the detective said. "Unless he was wearing female shoes, high-heeled, half his size. We did find tracks of those. Just a few, where the body was dragged off the ledge into gravel, where it was buried later on."

"Multiple personalities," Sipock said, while waiting for more fries. "We all have them. Some better, some worse. Odd little things seem to trigger them off. You should meet Betty." The sheriff grimaced. "My wife. One of her lesser personalities, that doesn't get triggered off too often, is quite pleasant."

"Flowerprint," Champlain said, "triggers off Pooter's bad side?"

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Sheriff Sipock stopped eating. "Flowerprint, absolutely. Now *there's* a trigger. I have been dreaming of blood-spattered flowerprinted dresses all night. Sexy. Forbidding." Sipock was sweating, gesturing with his steak knife. "Frightening. Fascinating."

"Don't get it," the detective said. "The phenomenon sure gets you guys going. Pooter." He looked at the sheriff. "You too." He looked at Champlain. "Something local maybe? It excites you too?"

Champlain shook his head. "What's so sexy about flowerprint dresses? Seem rather stodgy to me. Frumpish even."

"*You* tell us," the detective asked Sipock. "You say you dreamed all night? Nightmares? Flowery visions?"

"By the way," Sipock said. "You mentioned Christina had been robbed as well. Her pocketbook was empty?"

The state detective said the theft might not mean much. Killing and theft often go together. Once the victim is down, possessions are taken. He didn't think theft was a special motivation here. "Flowerprint," the detective said. "Mind answering my question, Sheriff? What's with the flowerprint dress? Why does that make you and Pooter sweat and stammer?"

Sipock was sweating again. He said he didn't know.

"Help me, Sheriff."

"I'm trying, Detective."

Champlain finally scored first. Sheriff and preacher, Champlain pointed out, were the same age. When the two were in puberty, times were sexually restricted. "Repressed," the detective said. "Sexual hang-ups," Champlain said. "We still have them here somewhat."

Sipock laughed. "Somewhat a lot, especially with folks my age. You're right there, Champ. You think there's a sexual connotation? Flowerprint—hanky-panky?"

"Keep going," the state detective said.

"Okay," Sipock nodded. "I understand my dream better now. For me and Preacher Pooter the flowerprint fashion arrives second time around. The first time it hit harder."

"Pubertal guilt feelings aroused by flowerprint dresses in males in their late fifties," the detective said. "I'll write a paper on that, should help out with my graduate studies. I thank you, Sheriff."

"Details?" Champlain asked.

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Sipock had grown up with several adult sisters, and youngish aunts. They wore flowerprint dresses when he became sexually conscious, fifty years ago. He desired those women, in the way they looked then.

"Did you want to wear flowerprint dresses yourself?" Champlain asked.

"Please," Sipock said. "Isn't desiring my sisters bad enough? That's incestuous. That's why I couldn't come up with an immediate answer." Sipock blushed.

"Seems to me we're looking for a perverted perpetrator here," the state detective said. "Someone male presumably, seeing that the corpse got carried quite some distance. Not Pooter, who wears size fourteen. A male with small feet who likes to dress up as a female and wear high-heeled shoes. Maybe likes to wear flowerprint dresses too. A transvestite who is homicidal when wearing a flowerprint dress, especially when his opponent, presumed opponent, wears another?"

"Switch of character," Sipock said. "Like the postmaster here. He's okay when he drives his mini-van, but he goes nuts when he rides his Harley."

Champlain almost jumped. "Japanese compact versus a full-size, all-American pickup? Okay one way, not at all okay the other? Or the other way around?"

"Right," the detective said. "You have a suspect now?"

"Let me do a little work here." Champlain got up. "Thanks for a great dinner. See you at your office, Sheriff. I might come up with something. I'll phone you here at the inn, Detective."

Clarence Bollinger looked relieved when he saw Champlain on his porch. "Come in, Deputy, such doings! Poor Christina. That helicopter was certainly busy. All of you were, weren't you?"

The two men sat in Bollinger's living room, with a wide view of Bunker Bay; beautiful, Champlain thought—four brown sails of the first tourist schooner of the season under wispy sunset-tinted clouds. He was comfortable in a large overstuffed easy chair upholstered with clean linen. He liked Bollinger's flower arrangements. He praised an enormous painting above the fireplace that showed a semi-nude woman on a couch. The woman could be forty. She was biting into an apple. There was a dog in the painting too, a large Labrador with its mouth open. Its long

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narrow pink tongue hung out. The woman's large but firm breasts, exposed by a flowerprint dress (red and white roses on a yellow background) sliding off pink shoulders, had different sizes. The woman seemed happy, unaware she was having her portrait painted.

The dog had its paws on the woman's lap and was pulling down her dress.

"Aunt Louisa and Christina the dog," Clarence Bollinger said. "Those two raised me. In New York. I was born here in Rotworth but my parents died in an accident, so Aunt Louisa took me over. She died last month, in her late seventies. The attorney sent me the painting. It's only been up a few weeks. You like it?"

Champlain tried to smile. He didn't like the painting so much now. It seemed indecent to him, sadistic. Both woman and dog smirked. Christina? Same name as the dead neighbor?

Clarence Bollinger, questioned by the deputy, seemed genuinely hurt by neighbor Christina's murder.

Was, Champlain asked, the little car outside Aunt Louisa's?

Bollinger was all smiles. Very helpful. Yes, he had inherited Aunt Louisa's car too, the green Subaru that he had just gotten Maine plates for, and Aunt's clothes, yes, everything. The dog Christina was long dead, of course. Talking of Christina, would the deputy mind filling Bollinger in re Christina LaCroix's murder?

So Christina was killed with a baseball bat. Awful. And her purse was emptied of money. Horrifying. A thief? Bollinger kept shaking his head, clasping and unclasping his hands. His eyes were wet.

The man must be working out, Champlain thought, remembering having seen weights in the corridor and a fitness machine. Bollinger might be small, but he was athletic. Close to sixty but in great shape. Close to sixty, same age as Pooter and Sheriff Sipock.

The deputy asked Clarence whether he, the caring, ever-aware neighbor, had noticed anything out of the ordinary lately? In Christina's murder there seemed to have been a woman involved. "Know of any lady visitors, Clarence?"

Bollinger desperately studied Champlain's face. "I guess you've seen plenty of this sort of thing, Deputy. Between Viet Nam and New York. Blood and gore. Was it police work you were doing in the Big Apple?"

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Why not? Champlain thought. Reaching out, getting personal, might help. He told Clarence Bollinger how he, Champlain, was the lone survivor in a Viet Nam battle, just before coming back. Eighteen men down, the bullets somehow missed medic Christof Champlain. How, back in Sorry, his parents worried about his lack of interest in girls. How he became a handyman in New York. How, with pals, he restored and sold a building in Tribeca.

"Pals," Bollinger said. He bit the nail off his index finger. "In Tribeca?"

"They died," Champlain said. "Three down. The virus somehow missed me."

"Back to Sorry again," Bollinger said, studying his ripped fingernail. "I know where you live now. Didn't you restore that awful trailer and put up all those feeders, on Bayview Road? Cleaned up your woods? It looks lovely now, like a park. I like your cedar hedges."

"Really?" Champlain looked pleased. "You noticed?"

"The landscaping cheers me up when I drive by," Bollinger said. "Your bird feeders look like little pagodas. Picked that up in Viet Nam?"

Bollinger walked Champlain to the cruiser. The full moon, luminously golden yellow, topped a line of tall evergreens. Aunt Louisa's Subaru reflected the moon's rays.

"Hardly use that toy," Bollinger said. "Much prefer the Dodge. Still going strong after a hundred thousand."

Champlain drove the cruiser to the sheriff's office. On the way Wynona Judd sang *"LUVVV"* from a tape. Love is possessive, the deputy thought, often abusive. Clarence Bollinger was possessed by his nude aunt. Growing up with domineering human and canine females. A dog called Christina rips a dress off a lopsided mother/lover figure. A small frail boy watches.

The deputy remembered how Bollinger bit off a fingernail at the mention of Tribeca. 'TRIangle BElow CAnal Street.' Not a good area. He remembered "Transvestite Square," where spectacular prostitutes postured in yellow lamplight.

"You two gentlemen apprehend Suspect," the detective said after Champlain reported. "You both know him. You're in uniform. It will be better that way. I'll just make him nervous."

"At his house?" Sipock asked.

"Not necessarily." The detective shook his head. He looked out of the window. "Full moon tonight, that will be a factor. Suspect

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won't be able to sleep. You might find him outside. In drag. In the compact."

Sipock and Champlain checked the grave location first. There were raccoons on the ledge, partying on moonlit rocks, yapping and snarling.

The lights were on in the Bollinger cottage and the Dodge pickup truck was parked in the driveway.

"He is home," Sipock said.

"*She* is not," Champlain said. "Left in the Subaru, but where to? Might be anywhere by now." He waved at the radio. "Put out an APB?" Sipock didn't think so. The cruiser nosed along slowly, finding the Subaru a mile farther along, on a turn-out, scenic, created for tourists.

Champlain switched off the cruiser's engine. He and Sipock watched Bollinger toss dollar bills out of the compact's window. "Getting rid of the loot taken off Christina LaCroix," Sipock said. "Bollinger doesn't need the money. Can't remember why he took it. Wants us to arrest him. It's like throwing out party invitations."

The figure in the car became still. Champlain walked over. "Evening, dear. Like to come with us now?"

Bollinger, dressed in Aunt Louisa's flowerprint dress, and heavily made-up, took a small pistol from his lap. His hand trembled as he pointed it at his forehead.

"Better give that to me, dear," Champlain said.

The pistol pointed at Champlain's head now. The deputy put out his hand. Bollinger sighed, then handed over the gun.

"Thank you, dear." Champlain opened the Subaru's door. He walked, with Bollinger daintily stepping on high-heeled shoes and leaning on his arm, back to the cruiser.

"Aunt Louisa trained Christina to pull off that dress," Bollinger said in a high but natural-sounding voice, "and then she'd sic the dog on me."

"How are you feeling?" Champlain asked.

"I have felt better," Bollinger said. "I'm very tired."

"You drive, Sheriff, please," Champlain said. "I'll sit in the back with our friend. Clarence is tired."

Bollinger smiled when Sipock reversed the cruiser from the turn-out. His hands were clasped in his lap. His head nodded forward. As soon as the cruiser began to follow the curves of Neck Road, Clarence Bollinger slept deeply. ●

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HERE BE MONSTERS

by Lisa Lepovetsky

It isn't only the ghosts of the dead that roam the streets at Halloween, but the ghosts of events long buried, as Lisa Lepovetsky's narrator discovers in this tale of family strife. This is Ms. Lepovetsky's fourth story for *EQMM*. As in the others, her interest is in the small-town rural community and the way lives within it cross. ¶

When I was a little girl, I loved to be scared. Now, when crimson and gold leaves rain from the maples and birches here in North Carolina to layer the ground, I'm sometimes a bit sorry that I've become too jaded to be really frightened anymore. Then I remember the last Halloween I spent back in Willowsburg, the year I turned fourteen. And I remember why I don't like to be scared anymore.

We wore rough paper and cloth masks then, not rubber or vinyl. Nobody worried about risking their fingers in that ancient, sensuous ritual of gutting and carving great pumpkins. Homemade demons and evil spirits roamed the streets at night, hoping for nothing more than a good clean scare. We traveled in packs, imagining that would protect us from what waited for us in the dark. And we screamed in terror—and relief—when the boys jumped out at us from behind a hedgerow.

All the houses on River Road, where we lived back then, were decorated with life-size paper skeletons and whispery cornstalks and real candlelit jack-o'-lanterns. I remember those disturbing idiot smiles flickering from front-porch railings, and the smell of charred squash as flames licked at the soft carved lids. The neighbors all lurked behind their doors on Halloween to hand out fruit or home-baked goodies to those of us who braved the night. I still remember how I loved the taste of fear mixed in with the sweets.

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I felt a curious combination of anticipation and regret that year, as autumn turned our small-town greens to brown. The roses had faded long ago, and the sky took on a deeper, more brittle blue behind the naked branches, a color that reminded me winter would soon be sniffing beneath the doors. I'd just started high school, and life just wasn't the same anymore. I'd moved into a new world, but I'd left something behind, too.

My mother didn't get our decorations out that fall. She was working extra shifts at the tannery, since Daddy had left. The second week of October, he'd put on his frayed brown suit and Panama hat, the way he always did when he went on a sales trip. Then he'd kissed Mama and me as he went out the door, whistling.

We were used to the sales trips, but he and Mama had argued the night before when he'd flown into one of his jealous rages, and she frowned a little when he kissed her. Mama often worried about him being gone, ever since he'd had the accident. Daddy had been touring another plant several years before, when a forklift went out of control, throwing him against a cement wall. He'd been in the hospital for a week, with broken ribs and a severe concussion, and was never quite the same after that.

The doctor couldn't find anything physically wrong, but Daddy seemed secretive, suspicious all the time after that, kind of sneaking around. And he began drinking more. He and Mama fought all the time, it seemed, mostly about things he thought she was "up to." No matter how much she denied them, he found some way to convince himself she was lying. So when he kissed her and smiled the morning after their big argument, she didn't smile back. She went to the window and watched him drive away until he disappeared in the distance.

A week later, the Friday before Halloween, Mama called the shoe factory where Daddy worked. He'd rarely been gone that long; his trips never lasted longer than three days. The people at the shoe factory told her he'd been fired a month earlier for beating up a foreman. They had no idea where he'd been going every weekday since then, and certainly no idea where he was now.

I happened to walk in on the end of the conversation after school. I was surprised to see her there, because she usually left for work before I got home.

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"What's up?" I asked as she cradled the receiver. Her back was still to me. As she turned around, I saw tears on her cheeks. My heart froze—I'd never seen my mother cry before, not even during one of Daddy's tirades. In a surprisingly steady voice, she explained what the manager of the shoe factory had just told her.

"I'm sure there's some mistake," she finished. "Or he's going through some kind of psychological trauma. He'll be back any day now; he always is. Don't you worry about it."

I didn't believe her, and I didn't think she believed herself. But I nodded and agreed with her. After all, what if Daddy didn't come back? There wouldn't be any more embarrassing phone calls to the local bars, looking for him. There'd be no fights in the middle of the night, while I covered my head with a pillow, praying he wouldn't slam out the back door again.

But he was my father, and I loved him. He hadn't always been so volatile, so tense. I knew that I could make everything right again, if he'd just give me the chance.

Mama redialed the phone as I started upstairs, and I heard her ask for Sheldon Owen, her boss at the tannery. I crept partway down the stairs again. I liked Shel Owen, everybody did. He was a widower who lived on an old farm about half a mile down River Road, where it twists to the west, away from town. He raised a little vegetable garden for himself, and about a half-acre of corn.

The first fall he moved into Willowsburg to take over the tannery, he hosted a neighborhood costume party/corn-roast the Saturday before Halloween. That was six years ago, but it was a huge success and became an instant tradition. Everybody on River Road prepared their costumes weeks in advance, trying to win first prize in the contest. Mr. Owen always found something interesting for the prize. That first year, Daddy won, dressed as an armchair, and he still carried the gold lighter with an evil jack-o'-lantern engraved on it. He'd been so proud of his prize, and we'd all had such fun that night. I cherished that memory.

"Shel?" Mama said quietly into the phone. "Harry's gone again—a week this time. . . . No, I don't think so. He's left before, but he always comes back after a week or so, when he gets tired of his little escapade. . . . I know, but that doesn't mean anything. Any minute now, he'll come marching through the door, wanting something to eat. I suppose we'll have to figure

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something out about the job, though. . . . I know you will. I just wanted you to know why I'll be a little late today. . . . I know you do. Thanks. Thanks for everything. Of course we'll be there tomorrow—wouldn't miss it. I'm bringing my carrot cake and Sammi's still working on her costume."

I'd forgotten about the picnic. I wondered whether we'd still go if Daddy came home. We'd never missed a corn roast in the six years Mr. Owen had hosted them. For some reason, Daddy had developed a hatred for Shel Owen and never wanted to go now, but Mama insisted we go anyway. He was her boss, after all, she said. How would it look?

One year, Daddy and Mama had a big fight the night before the roast. He refused to go the next day, and forbid us to go, too. Mama just looked him in the eye, grabbed her cake, and marched me out to the old Ford station wagon without a word. It was the only time I ever saw her disobey him. Daddy didn't come after us in his truck that time, but he never missed another corn roast. I don't think he enjoyed them anymore, but he dressed up and went along every year.

By the next morning, Daddy still hadn't come home. Mama packed up her witch costume into a plastic bag and left early to help Mr. Owen set up for the picnic. All his employees at the tannery seemed to like him, but he and Mama were especially close. They were about the same age, and never stopped talking about books and movies they both liked, and how "one of these days" Mr. Owen was going to help Mama plant her own vegetables. Sometimes I wondered about their relationship, but he was her boss, after all, and she was . . . well, she was my mother.

I got bored a couple of hours later, and decided to head over to the farm a little early. I hadn't wanted to wear a costume because I was afraid none of my friends would be wearing them. But Mama had talked me into wearing the spider costume I'd made the year before out of a leotard and four pairs of black tights. I stuffed it into a duffel bag and left a note for Daddy, in case he came home while we were gone.

On the way, I stopped off at my friend Alice's house, to see her costume. We talked for a while about what boys would be there, then had some sandwiches and a drink. I left about an hour later for Mr. Owen's house. The afternoon was so beautiful that I decided to take the long way, staying on the road, rather than cut through the little woods and the cornfield.

I scuffed little waves of dirt around my sneakers as I walked,

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enjoying the crisp autumn air and the musty smells of burning leaves and dropped pine needles. I started as something scurried across my feet, then laughed nervously as I realized it was only some dry leaves caught in a little gust of wind. Nothing is ever what it seems to be at Halloween. Twilit ghosts dancing in the shadows behind the garage are no more than shirts left to dry on the line. Even the weather is infidel; in no more than the casual snap of barometric fingers, sultry warm days can leave us damp and shivering. I walked a little faster, not as happy to be alone as I had been a moment before.

I got to Mr. Owen's house just before three, still an hour before anybody else was due to show up. The garden was black with newly filled soil, waiting for winter. I went around back first, to see whether there were any good ears of corn left in the field. I liked wandering through the dry cornstalks, listening to the papery sound they make, even on the stillest days, like little voices whispering. I noticed Mr. Owen had put up a new scarecrow in the center of the field, using scrap leather from the tannery. But, as usual, the birds were perched on its arms and the big floppy hat, not a bit scared. I always suspected Mr. Owen really didn't mind birds and animals in his cornfield that much, anyway. He even put a couple of the wormy ears out in his front yard for them every couple of days.

I headed toward the scarecrow anyway, assuming that if there were any good ears, that's where they'd be. When I got close to the center of the field, I noticed something shiny in the dirt between the stalks. I stooped to pick it up. My breath stopped and I felt goosebumps prickle on the back of my neck. *Daddy's lighter.*

I thought of Mama and Mr. Owen alone back at the house, and Daddy returning drunk from wherever he'd been. I imagined him finding my note and racing furiously through the woods and the cornfield to get there ahead of me, while I drank lemonade and chatted with Alice. I made myself stop imagining then, and ran back toward the house.

Mama and Mr. Owen came out onto the back porch just then. She had on her long black witch's dress and some makeup that I thought made her look more beautiful than frightening. Mr. Owen was carrying a paper-wrapped bundle. He took his arm from around Mama's shoulders when he saw me there, and Mama tucked a couple of strands of loose hair behind her ear with a trembling hand. Her eyes were red, and she came over

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and hugged me. She stepped back then and put her hands along the sides of my face. She looked into my eyes for a long time.

"Mama," I gasped, holding out the lighter. "I found this. I think Daddy's back. I was afraid that you . . . that he . . ."

Then Mr. Owen cleared his throat softly. Mama glanced at him. She smiled sadly and kissed my forehead as she took the lighter.

"Don't worry, Sammi," she said. "We're fine. See? There's nobody here but us. And look how dirty the lighter is. It must have been dropped awhile ago. Everything's fine."

She dropped the lighter into a pocket of her black dress. Before I had a chance to say more, she asked if I'd help set up the long picnic tables before everybody got there. Mr. Owen tucked the package into the pile of wood laid for the bonfire. We finished just as the first car pulled up, and I ran inside to change into my costume.

The corn roast was as fun as always, and we stuffed ourselves with buttery, salty kernels that popped in our mouths almost before we bit into them. Mr. Owen oohed and aahed over Mama's carrot cake until I was almost embarrassed for her. But she just smiled at him across the table, while everybody else nodded in agreement and dug in. The night settled onto the mountains like a cool, damp shawl, and a yellow moon began its ascent in the east.

Then came time for the bonfire. Mr. Owen let a couple of the men light it, while he brought out a tray stacked with marshmallows. The children all ran to find thin green branches for toasting them, and those of us who were too old to show that much enthusiasm found our own sticks more quietly.

When everybody was settled on a railroad tie, one of the kids called out for a ghost story. Everyone cheered. Mama turned to Mr. Owen.

"Shel, you know some good stories," she said. "Tell one." We all clapped our encouragement.

He shook his head. "Not this year," he said, looking at my mother. "I can't think of any." She looked away.

There was some good-natured booing and more clapping. Then Mr. Owen looked at me. I nodded and mouthed the word *please,* and he smiled, the same sad smile Mama had on her face earlier.

"Okay," he said, sitting back on his haunches and looking into the fire. "This one is about monsters, monsters who look like

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people, wear people's faces, but are deformed and evil underneath. Kind of a Halloween costume in reverse."

Mr. Owen stared into the fire for a few seconds, frowning. He looked as if he'd forgotten all about the party around him.

"These monsters find families to infiltrate," he continued. "They pick the best husbands and wives and the nicest kids because that's where they find sustenance. They're always hungry, never satisfied. They insert invisible fangs into the lives of the ones they should love the most and feed on that gentleness and love, grinding and devouring it until there isn't anything left. Those families just walk around with nothing inside, empty as the sky. Then they just blow away in the first wind."

One of the smaller children whimpered, "Mommy, that's scary." Mr. Owen glanced up as though surprised to find all of us still there. He stood and kicked a corn husk into the fire.

"You're right," he said. "That's a lousy story. I'm sorry, but I guess I'm just too tired for a good story tonight."

After that, the guests seemed rather subdued, and the party never quite got going again. It broke up early, most of the parents packing up their little ones and saying good night. A few of the older teens and single adults fiddled around with their marshmallow sticks for a while, but even they didn't stay much longer.

Mama and I were the last to leave. She went inside alone to say good night to Mr. Owen, then we headed up the road in the old station wagon. Neither of us said much; it had been a long day, and we were tired. When we got home, the note was still on the kitchen table where I'd left it. I crumpled it up and tossed it into the trash can.

I never saw Daddy again, and Mama threw out the Halloween decorations the next spring when we moved away from Willowsburg. I have my own house now, and my porch light remains off every Halloween night to discourage trick-or-treaters. I keep my door locked tightly to keep out monsters. I don't like remembering that last Halloween party at Mr. Owen's house.

Because then I remember seeing Mama silhouetted against the bonfire, after everybody had gone home. She threw something into the flames that looked a lot like a Panama hat. And I remember that tilled patch of earth behind Mr. Owen's house, and what the police found buried there after I gave them the lighter I dug back out of Mama's pocket. And I hope Mr. Owen forgives me. ●

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Art by Anthony Bari

VIGIL

by Katherine H. Brooks

A mist surrounded the vacant house
on the edge of a jagged shore,
And it seemed to clutch at a broken pane
in the bay on the second floor,
And those who wandered the lonely beach
were destined to feel a chill
When two pale faces looked out at them
from the depths of the window sill.

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They spoke, in town, of the fisherman,
in a solemn and muted way,
And the lovely daughter he'd raised with care,
and trusted would always stay;
But tides are fickle, and plans are frail,
and she'd offered her heart to one
From her father's crew, and they planned, he knew,
to wed when the trip was done.

It took no more than a stealthy shove
in the dark of a stormy night,
And his victim fell, with a startled yell,
as he frantically flailed from sight.
When the ship returned, and the young girl learned
that the ocean had claimed her lad,
She screamed and cried that he hadn't died,
while her father prayed he had.

Detached and silent they strove to live,
and cope with the dreadful strain,
And closely watched what the sea would give,
from the view of the window pane—
Two faces pressed to the misty glass,
two minds that were loath to sleep,
With hollowed eyes, thinking soon would rise
a spectacle from the deep.

No future date would relieve their wait
for a vision that never came,
And they lingered there, till, in disrepair,
the house was an empty frame—
Two wraiths, eternally side by side,
though never a word was said—
A daughter waiting to be a bride,
and a father consumed with dread.

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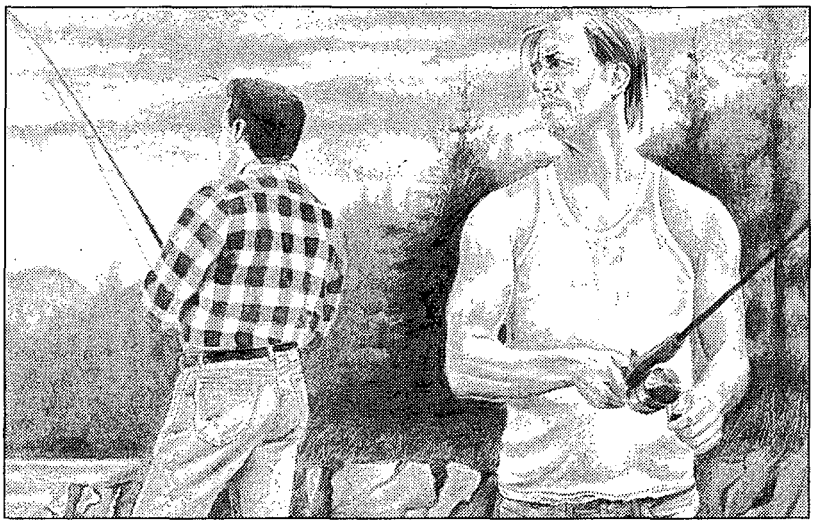

Art by Steve Cavallo

GONE FISHING

by Jeffery Deaver

"Don't go, Daddy."

"Rise and shine, young lady."

"Please?"

"And what's my little Jessie-Bessie worried about?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

Alex sat on the edge of her bed and hugged the girl. He felt the warmth of her body, smelled the peculiar, heart-swelling smell of a child just waking.

From the kitchen a pan clattered, then another. Water running. The refrigerator door slamming. Sunday morning sounds. It was early, six-thirty.

She rubbed her eyes. "I was thinking. . . . What we could do is we could go to the penguin room at the zoo. You said we could go there soon. And if you have to go to the lake, I mean really

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have to, we could go to Central Park and go rowing like we did that time. Remember?"

Alex shivered in mock disgust. "What sorts of fish do you think I'd catch *there?* Icky fish with three eyes and scales that glowed in the dark."

"You don't have to go fishing. We could just row around and feed the ducks."

He looked out the window at the dim gray horizon of New Jersey across the Hudson River. The whole state seemed asleep, and probably was.

"Please, Daddy? Stay home with us."

"We played all day yesterday," he pointed out, as if this would convince her that she could do without him today. He was of course aware that children's logic and adults' bore absolutely no resemblance to one another; still he continued. "We went to F.A.O. Schwarz and Rockefeller Center and I bought you two, count 'em, hot dogs from Henri's *à côté de la* subway. And then—Rumpelmayer's."

"But that was *yesterday!*"

Youngsters' logic, Alex decided, was by far the most compelling.

"And what did you eat at Rumplestiltskin's?"

When logic failed, he was not above diversion.

The eight-year-old tugged at her nightgown. "Banana split."

"You did?" He looked shocked. "No!"

"Did too, and you know it. You were there."

"How big was it?"

"You know!"

"I know nothing, I remember nothing," he said in a thick German accent.

Like his stories for *EQMM*, Jeffery Deaver's latest novels for Viking books are explorations of psychology as well as crime stories. The recently published *A Maiden's Grave* (Viking) which takes a look at the Stockholm Syndrome (victims' identification with their captors), has already been optioned for film, and another of his novels, *Speaking in Tongues*, will be released in 1996. ✝

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"Thisssss big." She held her hands far apart.

Alex said, "Impossible. You would've blown up like a balloon. Pop!" And she broke into giggles under his tickling fingers.

"Up and at 'em," he announced. "Breakfast together before I leave."

"Daddy," she persisted. But he escaped from her room.

He assembled his fishing tackle, stacked it by the door, and walked into the kitchen. Kissed Sue on the back of the neck and slipped his arms around her as she dribbled pancake batter into the skillet.

Pouring orange juice for the three of them, Alex said, "She doesn't want me to go today. She's never said anything before."

His wife stacked the pancakes on a plate and set them in the oven to warm. Then she glanced down the hall where their daughter, in her purple Barney slippers, wandered sleepily into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

"Jessie was watching the tube the other night," Sue said. "I was doing homework and wasn't paying attention to what. Next thing I knew, she ran out of the room, crying. I didn't see the program but I looked it up in the paper. It was some made-for-TV movie about a father who was kidnapped and held hostage. The kidnapper killed him and then came after his wife and daughter. I think there were some pretty graphic scenes. I talked to her about it, but she was pretty upset."

Alex nodded slowly. He'd grown up watching horror flicks and shoot-'em-up westerns; in fact, he'd ironically found the Saturday matinees a placid sanctuary from his abusive father. As an adult he'd never thought twice about violence in films or on TV—until he became a father himself. Then he immediately began censoring what Jessica watched. He didn't mind that she knew death and violence existed; it was the gratuitous, overtly gruesome carnage lacing popular shows that he wanted to keep from her.

"She's afraid I'm going to get kidnapped while I'm fishing?"

"She's eight. It's a big bad world out there."

It was so difficult with children, he reflected. Teaching them to be cautious of strangers, aware of real threats, but not making them so scared of life they couldn't function. Learning the difference between reality and make-believe.

Five minutes later the family was sitting around the table, Alex and Sue flipping through the Sunday *Times,* reading aloud

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portions of stories that seemed interesting. Jessica, accompanied by Raoul, a stuffed bear, methodically ate first her bacon, then her pancakes, and finally a bowl of cereal.

The girl pretended to feed Raoul a spoonful of cereal and asked thoughtfully, "Why do you like to fish, Daddy?"

"It's relaxing."

"Oh." The bits of cereal were in the shape of some cartoon creature. Ninja Turtles? Alex wondered.

"Your father needs some time off," Sue said. "You know how hard he works."

As the creative director of a Madison Avenue ad agency, Alex regularly clocked sixty- and seventy-hour weeks.

Sue continued, "He's a type-A personality through and through."

"I thought you had a secretary, Daddy. Doesn't she do your typing?"

Her parents laughed. "No, honey," Sue said. "That means somebody who works real hard. Everything he does has to get him closer to his goal or he isn't interested in it." She rubbed Alex's muscular back. "That's why his ads are so good."

"The Cola Koala!" Jessica's face lit up.

As a surprise for the girl, Alex had just brought home some of the original art cells of the animated cartoon figure he'd created to hawk a product its manufacturer hoped would cut large chunks out of Pepsi's and Coke's market shares. The pictures of the cuddly creature hung prominently on her wall next to portraits of Cyclops and Jean Grey, of X-Men fame, Spiderman, and, of course, the Power Rangers.

"Fishing helps me relax," Alex said, looking up from the sports section.

"Oh."

Sue packed his lunch and filled a thermos of coffee.

"Daddy?" Moody again, the girl stared at her spoon then let it sink down into the bowl.

"What, Jessie-Bessie?"

"Were you ever in a fight?"

"A fight? Good grief, no." He laughed. "Well, in junior high I was. But not since then."

"Did you beat the guy up?"

"In junior high? Whupped the tar out of him. Patrick Briscoe. He stole my lunch money. I let him have it. Left jab and a right hook. Technical knockout in three rounds."

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She nodded, swallowed a herd, or school, of Ninja Turtles, and set her spoon down again. "Could you beat up somebody now?"

"Adults don't have to fight, sweetheart. They talk out their disagreements. Fighting's only for kids."

"Oh." She pushed her cereal around. "Does that mean you don't remember how to fight?"

"Honey—"

"What if somebody, like a robber, came after you? Could you knock him out?"

"Look at these muscles. Is this Schwarzenegger, or what?" He pulled up the sleeves of his plaid Abercrombie hunting shirt and flexed. The girl lifted impressed eyebrows.

So did Sue.

Alex paid nearly two thousand dollars a year to belong to a Midtown health club, which he actually worked out in three times a week.

"Sweetheart." Alex leaned forward and put his hand on the girl's arm. "You know that the things they show on TV, like that movie you saw, they're all made up. You can't think real life is like that. People are basically good."

"I just wish you weren't going today."

"Why today?"

She looked outside. "The sun isn't shining."

"Ah, but that's the best time to go fishing. The fish can't see me coming. Hey, pumpkin, tell you what . . . how 'bout if I bring you something?"

Her face brightened. "Really?"

"Yup. What would you like?"

"I don't know. Wait, yes, I do. Something for our collections. Like last time?"

"You bet, sweetie. You got it."

Last year Alex had seen a counselor. He'd come close to a breakdown, struggling to juggle his roles as overworked executive, husband of a law-school student, father, and put-upon son (his aging father, usually drunk and always unruly, had been placed in an expensive mental hospital Alex could barely afford). The therapist had told him to do something purely for himself—a hobby or sport. At first he'd resisted the idea as a pointless frivolity, but the doctor firmly warned that the relentless anxiety he felt would kill him within a few years if he didn't find something to help him relax.

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After considerable thought Alex had taken up freshwater fishing (which would get him away from the city) and then collecting (which he could pursue at home). Jessica, with no interest in the "yucky" sport of fishing, became his co-conspirator in the collecting department. Alex would bring home the *objets* and the girl would log them into the computer and mount or display the collectibles. The father-daughter team specialized in matchbook covers, wrist watches, kitschy jewelry, and—naturally Jessica's favorite—stuffed animals. Raoul was the addition he'd brought back from his most recent fishing trip.

This morning he asked his daughter, "Now, young lady, is it okay for me to go off and catch us dinner?"

"I guess," the little girl said, though she wrinkled her nose at the thought of actually eating a bite of fish. But Alex could see relief in her blue eyes—though she probably wished that he'd take a ninja sword with him for protection.

When she'd wandered off to play on the computer, Alex helped Sue with the dishes. "She's fine," he said. "We'll just have to be more careful about what she watches. That's the problem—mixing up make-believe and reality. . . . Hey, what is it?"

For his grim-looking wife continued to dry what was already a very dry plate.

"Oh, nothing. It's just . . . I never really thought about you going off to the wilderness alone before. I mean, you always think about somebody getting mugged in the city, but at least there're people around to help. And the cops're just a few minutes away."

Alex hugged her. "This isn't exactly the Outback we're talking. It's only three hours north of here."

"I know. I never thought to worry till Jessie said something."

He stepped back and shook a stern finger at her. "All right, young lady. No more TV for you either."

She laughed and patted his butt. "Hurry home. And clean the fish *before* you get back. I'm not dealing with another mess like last time."

"Yes'm."

"Hey, hon," she asked, "were you really in a fight in junior high school?"

He glanced toward Jessica's room and whispered, "Those three rounds? They were more like three seconds. I pushed Pat

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down, he pushed me, and the principal sent us both home, crying, with notes to our parents."

"I didn't think you and John Wayne had anything in common." Her smile faded. "Safe home," she said, her family's traditional valediction. And kissed him once more.

Alex turned off the highway, snapped the Pathfinder into four-wheel drive, and made his way along a dirt road toward Wolf Lake, a large, deep body of water in the Adirondacks. As he progressed farther into the dense woods, Alex decided that he agreed with his daughter: The day needed sunlight. The March sky was gray and windy and the leafless trees were black from an early-morning rain. Fallen branches and logs filled the scruffy forest like scattered petrified bones.

Alex felt the familiar anxiety twisting in his stomach. Tension and stress—the banes of his life. He breathed slowly, forcing himself to think comforting thoughts—of his wife and his daughter. And the pleasure of casting a heavy spinner into the smooth water and feeling the first tug of a fish on the line.

Come on, boy, he told himself, I'm here to relax. That's the whole point of it. Relax.

He drove another half mile through the thickening woods.

Deserted.

The temperature wasn't cold but the threat of rain, he supposed, had scared off the weekend fishermen. The only vehicle he'd seen for miles was a beat-up pickup truck, mud-spattered and much dented. Alex drove fifty yards past it, to the point where the road vanished, and parked.

The cool, airy smell of the water drew him forward, his tackle box and spinning rod in one hand, his lunch and thermos in the other. Through the white pine, juniper, and hemlock, over small moss-covered hummocks. He passed a bald tree with seven huge black crows sitting in it. They seemed to watch him as he walked beneath their skeletal perch. Then he broke from the trees and climbed down a rocky slope to the lake.

Standing on the shore of a narrow cove, Alex looked over the water. Easily a mile wide, the lake was an iridescent gray, choppy toward the middle but smoothing to a linenlike texture closer to shore. The bleakness didn't make him feel particularly sad but it didn't help his uneasiness either. He closed his eyes and breathed in the clean air. Rather than calming, though, he

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felt a surge race through him—a fear of some sort, raw, electric—and he spun about, certain that he was being watched. He couldn't see a soul but the woods were too dense, too entangled to be certain. Someone could easily have been spying on him from a thousand different nooks.

Re-lax, he told himself angrily. You're paranoid. Relax. Relax-relaxrelax. . . .

And he grew angrier yet when he couldn't.

For an hour he fished with a vengeance, casting spoons, then jigs. He had no luck. He switched to a surface popper and had a couple of strikes, but the fish never took the hook. Once, just after he launched the green froglike lure through the air, he felt a painful chill down his back, turned quickly once more, and studied the forest. No one.

Damn, he *had* to calm down. Again, he closed his eyes and tried to will the anxiety away. No effect. His anger continued to grow. He reeled in the lure, actually hoping that no fish would interrupt what he now felt compelled to do. He dropped to his knees and dug through his tackle box. At the bottom he found the old knife he used for cleaning fish. It wasn't much of a weapon—only about seven inches long—but it was very sharp. Holding the knife he had a fleeting memory of his father, years ago, pulling off his belt and wrapping the end around his fist, telling young Alex to pull down his jeans and bend over. "You left that screwdriver outside, boy. How many times I gotta tell you to treat your tools with respect. Oil the ones that rust, dry the ones that warp, and keep your knives sharp as razors. Now, I'm giving you five for ruining that screwdriver. Here it comes. One . . . "

He'd never known what screwdriver the man had been talking about. Probably there wasn't one. But Alex the boy and Alex the man had always oiled, dried, and sharpened.

He now slipped the scabbard into his back pocket, feeling somewhat better. Even a foolish weapon gives solace. He cast a few more times halfheartedly then hooked the lure into the bail of his reel and began walking along the shore, heading east. He stepped from rock to rock carefully, looking down the whole time, mindful of the slippery surfaces. Once he nearly tumbled into the cold black water when his attention wandered and he found himself staring too intently at the reflections of the fast-moving strips of clouds, gray and grayer in the pools at his feet.

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Because he was gazing at his footing, he didn't see the man until he was only ten or twelve feet from him. Alex glanced up and stopped. The driver of the pickup truck, he assumed.

He was in his fifties, dressed in filthy jeans and a torn work-shirt. Gaunt and wiry, his face was foxlike, an impression accentuated because of a two- or three-day growth of beard. His right hand held a galvanized pipe high over his head. His left gripped the tail of a walleye pike, holding the thrashing, shimmering fish against a rock. He glanced at Alex, took in his expensive, designer-label outdoor clothing, and then slammed the pipe down on the fish's head, killing it instantly. He pitched it into a bucket and returned to the lakeside.

"Morning," Alex said. "How you doing?"

The man nodded, unsmiling.

"Having any luck?"

"Some." The fellow eyed the clothes again and began casting.

"Haven't caught a thing."

The man said nothing.

"What're you using?"

"Mepps. On a twelve-inch leader. Fifteen-pound line."

"I tried a Mepps before. And a popper."

The man snorted. Alex felt his anxiety crawl back. Fishermen were usually among the friendliest of sportsmen, willing to share their intelligence about lures and locations. It wasn't as if they were competing for the only fish in the whole damn lake, he thought.

Alex stood on the rocks, not saying anything, feeling more and more the fool—and angry at what he was sure was a snub. No way was he going to be driven away. This was public land and he had every right to be here.

"Mind if I have my lunch here?" Alex said coolly.

"Suit yourself."

What the hell's so hard about being polite? he wondered. If people behaved the way they ought to, the decent way he'd told Jessie they behaved, the world would be so different—no hate, no anger, no scared little girls.

No anxiety.

He sat on a rock, opened the bag, and pulled out his sandwich and apple. His hand touched something else—a piece of drawing paper, folded in quarters. Opening it, Alex felt a rush of emotion. Jessica had drawn him a picture with the colored pencils he'd

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bought for her birthday last month and hidden it inside the bag. The drawing was of him—a square-jawed, clean-shaven man with thick black hair—reeling in a shark about ten times his size. The fish had a terrified expression on its face. Beneath it she'd written:

Fish beware . . . my daddy's out there!!!
—Jessica Bessie Mollan

He laughed out loud, thought fondly of his family once more, and his anger dissipated. He ate the meatloaf sandwich slowly. Then opened the thermos. He called out, "Hey, mister, would you like some coffee? My wife made it special. It's French roast."

"Coffee ain't good for you," the man grumbled, turning and studying the interloper once again.

Alex thought: This fellow probably doesn't have anyone at home waiting for him. The man wore no wedding ring. Who'd put up with his disgusting clothes and appearance? It looked as if he hadn't washed his hair for a week.

Useless old guy. . . .

But not so old, actually, Alex thought. And gaunt, yes, but not so scrawny either. The man had taken off his shirt and wore only a sleeveless T-shirt. It revealed strong muscles beneath his leathery skin. He looked back once more and Alex was sure he saw brimming hostility in his eyes.

Alex held his gaze for a minute, then looked away.

It was then that he noticed a piece of paper tacked up on a tree nearby. He couldn't make out the words from where he sat, but at the bottom was what looked like an official seal of some sort. He wondered if it had to do with new fishing regulations. He rose and read it. It was not from the Fishery and Game at all. It was from the county sheriff's office.

He frowned and read it again.

Alex took a breath and began to call to the fisherman but found that the man was no longer by the lake. He'd set his rod down and was walking toward Alex. He stopped close-by, at a tree stump, sawn off smooth about three feet above the ground, like a table. It was darkly stained. He set down the bucket he carried and pulled a fish out, flopped it down on the stump with a smack. He beheaded it fast with a long, sharp knife and slit open the slick belly, scooping out the entrails with his fingers. He pitched the head and the guts ten feet away into a cluster

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of waiting crows and they began to fight noisily over the wet, sticky flesh. The cleaned carcass the man tossed back into the bloody bucket.

"You readin' 'bout that fellow?" he asked, not looking up.

"I never heard about it," Alex responded uneasily.

The notice offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for information about the killer or killers of five individuals in and around Wolf Lake State Park over the past six months.

The man shook his head. "Three men and a woman and her little girl." He drew the knife along the pink-gray flesh of another walleye. "Sometimes cut their hands off. Cut off other stuff too. Sometimes. Then they was robbed."

He threw more guts to the crows.

Alex watched the blade slice through a pike's neck. His anxiety wouldn't go away. It was like a premonition, like the certain knowledge of a tumor before the CAT-scan results are in. This was the worst he'd felt in months. His heart was beating with deep, quick thuds. He stared at the notice. There was no description of the killer.

He glanced up to see the fisherman pitch more guts to the crows.

"Doesn't make much sense to rob fishermen." Alex said the first thing that came to mind.

"Doesn't make sense to kill nobody either, but killed they was. And robbed too. Whatever makes sense to you or don't."

Alex was disgusted to see him wipe his hands on his jeans, leaving streaks of cold black blood. The man seemed to revel in painting himself with viscera. It occurred to Alex that he was doing this for the shock value alone.

The man took out a pair of old wire-rimmed glasses, put them on, and looked at Alex once more, studying him. Oddly the glasses didn't make the man look weaker, as you'd expect, but more ominous, more dangerous, colder—the image of a Nazi doctor slipped into Alex's mind and wouldn't leave.

"You a rich boy, are you? Come up from the city?"

"That's right."

"I was to New York once," he said and gutted another fish.

Silence fell between them.

"Well," Alex said, "it's getting late. You have the time?"

The man shook his head.

"I think I'll be heading back home. I'm not having much luck."

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"Fishing ain't luck."

Alex gulped down coffee he had no taste for and took a deep breath. *Calm down,* he instructed himself harshly. Calm, calm, calm . . .

"Don't go, Daddy. . . . please."

He screwed the thermos back together, watching his hands shake fiercely. He smiled uneasily and walked in a wide circle around the man to collect his tackle box and rod.

"I can get up to the road that way?" Alex asked, pointing along a rocky trail.

"Yep."

"Take care," Alex said.

The man nodded. For the first time a smile seemed to cross the man's face.

Feeling engulfed by anxiety, Alex started quickly along the path.

He got only a few yards.

He cried loudly as his three-hundred-dollar L. L. Bean boots slid off the rock path and he tumbled into a shallow ravine. He landed on his feet but pitched forward into a rock and rolled onto his back, cradling his leg. He gasped and moaned loudly. "Oh God, it hurts."

The fisherman appeared slowly above him, wiping his bloody hands on his jeans.

"That rock," Alex groaned. "It's loose, somebody loosened it! Be careful, it's a trap."

"A trap, you say?" The man's dark face was no longer smiling.

"It's my ankle. I sprained it."

The man's gaze took in Alex's spotless down vest, the rich flannel shirt, the many-pocketed slacks. And the supple leather boots. What's in his eyes? Alex wondered. Smugness, pleasure at seeing someone else in pain?

"Here now, mister," the man called. "Don't you move. I'll come and get you."

But rather than climbing down the short distance Alex had fallen, the man disappeared behind a tall outcropping of rock.

"Hey . . . " Alex started to say, then stopped. He listened carefully and heard nothing. Had he gone to get a weapon? A gun? His long, black-bladed fishing knife?

A moment later the man's footsteps began to approach, from behind—he'd climbed down a hill and was walking toward Alex

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through a narrow alley between two huge rocks.

Still clutching his leg with one arm, his heart pounding, Alex slid around so that he'd be facing the man when he approached. He backed against the steep hill he'd tumbled down. He reached behind him and unsnapped the restraining thong on the scabbard of his knife. He felt the reassuring coldness of the stag's-horn handle.

The footsteps grew closer.

"Hello?" Alex called.

No response.

"Hey?" he shouted again.

The sound of boots on sand became boots on rocks as the disheveled man approached. He carried a small metal box in his left hand.

He paused, standing directly above Alex.

He opened the box. Alex tensed.

Have you ever been in a fight, Daddy?

The man said, "Gotta apologize for lookin' at you like you was a fish in a tank. Since them killings started I check out everybody comes here pretty close."

No, pumpkin, I always catch them by surprise.

As the man pulled an elastic bandage from the first-aid kit Alex rose quickly, stepping behind the surprised fisherman, and caught him in a neck lock. He smelled unclean hair, dirty clothes, and the piquant scent of fish entrails. He jammed the stag's-horn knife into the man's belly. The fisherman's scream would have been quite loud, but Alex kept his strong hand over the man's mouth until the sound became a choked moan.

As he worked the blade leisurely up to the man's breastbone, Alex was pleased to find, as with his other five victims, that the anxiety that'd been boiling within him vanished immediately.

Ah, sweet peace. . . .

He slowly eased the man to the ground, where he lay on his back quivering. Alex glanced toward the road, but the park was still deserted. Smiling, he bent low and examined the man carefully. No, he wasn't quite dead yet, though he soon would be, perhaps before the crows started to work on him.

Perhaps not. The birds seemed particularly hungry today.

Alex wiped the blood off his knife, climbed back up to the path, and had a second cup of coffee. This one he enjoyed immensely; Sue truly was a master with the espresso maker.

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Later that night Alex returned home to find *Sixty Minutes* on, Jessica and Sue sitting on the couch in front of the tube sharing a huge bowl of popcorn. He was pleased that the show was about a government contractor's malfeasance, and not murder or rape or anything that might upset the little girl. He hugged them both hard.

"Hey, Jessie-Bessie, how's the world's best daughter?"

"You okay, Daddy?"

"Right as rain."

"Missed you!"

He winked at Sue and could see in her face that she was pleased to find him in such a good mood. She was more pleased still when he told her that all the fish he'd caught were below size and he'd had to throw them back. She was a sport, but fish, to her, was a dish brought to your table and deftly boned by a waiter.

"Did you bring me something, Daddy?" Jessica asked coyly, tilting her head and letting her long blond hair hang down over her shoulder.

Alex thought, as he often did: She'll be a heartbreaker some day.

"Sure did."

"Something for our collection?"

"Yep."

"What is it? Is it a watch? Or a friend for Raoul?"

"No watches and no stuffed bears," he said. "Look at this."

"Oh, wow, Daddy," she whispered. She carefully took the old-fashioned wire-rimmed glasses in her hand. "These are totally neat."

"I thought it was time we started a new collection," he told her.

"I'll make a special box just for glasses," she said. "I'm glad you're home, Daddy."

His daughter hugged him hard, and then Sue called to them from the dining room, saying that dinner was ready and could they please come and sit down. ●

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LEOPOLD LENDS A HAND

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's Leopold is certainly not the first character in the history of detective fiction to be resurrected after an authorial decision to retire him from the scene (remember Sherlock Holmes and Reichenbach Falls). And of course, Mr. Hoch hasn't had to bring him back from apparent death, but in this new adventure the author has found it necessary to temporarily reinstate Leopold in the police department.

Leopold pulled up before the little brick guardhouse at the entrance to the Bellview Sound Estates and flashed the shiny honorary badge he'd carried since his retirement. "I'm with Captain Fletcher's squad," he told the uniformed guard.

The guard consulted a handwritten list on his clipboard, taking no chances. "Name?"

"Leopold."

"Go on," he said, waving the car through. "It's the middle building—the unfinished one."

There were three squad cars plus Fletcher's unmarked Pontiac parked in front of the building. A truck from the technical unit stood off to one side and the medical examiner's vehicle was just backing into position. One of the uniformed patrolmen stood by the elevator and Leopold headed for him.

"Hello, Captain. How's retirement treating you?"

"Can't complain, Cahill. Captain Fletcher gave me a call. What floor are they on?"

"Top one. Number ten."

He found Fletcher and his men in one of the unfinished condominiums, standing off to one side while still and video cameras recorded the murder scene. The victim, a well-dressed man with black hair and a bushy moustache, seemed out of place on the

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bare concrete floor of the building, surrounded by boxes and piles of tile waiting to be installed.

"What have you got, Fletcher?" Leopold asked.

"Thanks for coming. What I've got is more cases than the violent crimes squad can handle at the moment. Connie's working on a drug stabbing and I've got two people on vacation. I called you because I thought you might help with some of the routine questioning."

"I'm always happy to help out. Who's the dead man?"

"Vladimir Petrov, a Russian businessman who emigrated to America about five years ago. That's really all we know so far. He'd purchased the condo on this floor—the most expensive in the building, by the way—and apparently had come here today to check on progress. He was shot twice in the chest at fairly close range."

"Anyone hear the shots?"

"There are twenty men and a couple of women working on the building today. That's what we have to find out. I thought you could help Spencer and Frawley interview them."

"Glad to," Leopold said. It reminded him of his early days as a detective, before he'd been in charge of the squad, before the age barrier had forced his retirement. Fletcher's call for help wasn't exactly in keeping with departmental regulations but Leopold was more than willing to lend a hand. His wife Molly was in court defending a rape suspect in a difficult case and he was pretty much shifting for himself these days.

The man who'd found the body was a crew chief named Al Haskins. His men had laid tile in the condo's three bathrooms earlier in the week, working on a subcontract from the builder of the condominium. He was a tall, slender man with dark hair and glasses, dressed in a T-shirt and work pants. "Had you seen Mr. Petrov before the shooting?" Leopold asked, jotting down notes as they talked.

"Not today. But it wasn't unusual for him to stop by and see how things were coming. He and his wife were anxious to move in."

"The guards allowed him onto the grounds?"

Al Haskins smiled. "He paid a million three for this place. No way you're going to keep him out."

"That's expensive real estate." They'd walked out onto the screened-in terrace overlooking Long Island Sound. Ten stories

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below, a few yachts were visible on the blue water.

"Part of it's the view," Haskins explained. "The condos are pretty much the same, but the higher you go the more expensive they get."

"What did Petrov do for a living?"

"Beats me. Some sort of art dealer in Manhattan, I think. Didn't seem to work very hard at it, though. He hung around here a lot. Sometimes his wife came too."

"So he was up here today—alone?"

A shrug. "You'd have to get that from the guard at the entrance. I told you I hadn't seen him."

"Didn't you hear any shots?"

"I don't think so. Sometimes there's a little hammering and it's hard to tell what you're hearing."

"What brought you up here?"

"Like I said, my crew had tiled the bathrooms." He led the way into one of them. "The inspector for the builder was up yesterday to check out our work. See—she puts these little blue stickers wherever there's a flaw to be corrected. I came up to see how many things had to be fixed."

"And you found Petrov."

"Yeah." He patted the two-way radio hanging from his belt. "I called downstairs and told them to get the police."

"Your people do nice work," Leopold said, inspecting the tile that lined the walls and floor of a shower stall. A grouping of four larger ones had been painted with the unmistakable likeness of Cleopatra. "Fancy."

"Petrov's wife picked those out. They're twenty-five bucks each."

Leopold returned to Fletcher and the others as the medical examiner was supervising removal of the body. "Did you check to see if the victim's wife came with him today?"

Fletcher nodded. "He was alone. The gatehouse checked him in at eleven-ten, about an hour before Haskins found the body. We haven't been able to tell his wife yet. Come downstairs with me. Spencer has been going through his car and he found something."

The victim's car, not surprisingly, was a foreign make that sold for better than fifty thousand dollars. Spencer had opened the trunk with keys from the dead man's pocket and found a painted wooden panel carefully wrapped in soft cloth. It was

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about six by eight inches in size and seemed very old. "A religious scene," Fletcher decided. "Some saint, judging by the halo."

"It's an icon," Leopold said. "Byzantine, possibly Russian." Fletcher raised his eyebrows and Leopold added, "Molly's been helping my cultural awareness since my retirement."

"Good for you." But something clicked in his mind and he took out a business card. "This was in the dead man's pocket too. Think there's a connection?"

" 'Rachel Dean, Art Appraisals,' " Leopold read. "The address is local. Maybe we should give her a call. Better still, have your men photograph this icon and log it in. Then I'll drive over and show it to Rachel Dean myself."

"I didn't mean to get you so deeply involved in this," Fletcher said. "I just thought you could question some of the workmen. After all, with the security around this place, it's likely that one of them shot him."

Leopold remembered the blue waters of the Sound. "Unless the killer came by boat."

Rachel Dean's shop was in a mall across town from the Bellview Sound Estates. She sold art works on consignment and the shop was a small gallery hung with oils and watercolors, some by local painters. The woman herself was red-haired, dressed and made-up to appear both younger and more attractive than she really was. Close up, Leopold could see the lines of middle age beginning to show. Leopold introduced himself, keeping the icon wrapped and under his arm for the moment.

"We're investigating a homicide," he said. "Your card was found in the victim's pocket."

"Vladimir Petrov," she said at once. "My God!"

"How did you know?"

"You've got one of his icons under your arm. I wrapped it in that cloth to protect it. What happened to him?"

"He was shot and killed at the condominium he purchased in Bellview Sound Estates. The icon was in the trunk of his car and your business card was in his pocket. What do you know about it, Ms. Dean?"

"It's Mrs. Dean, although we've been separated for years. Come into my office, Mr.—?"

"Captain Leopold, retired. I'm helping the police on this."

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He followed her into a back office with a locked and barred window. Several paintings were leaning against the wall opposite her desk. He sat down in the only free chair, facing her. "Mr. Petrov contacted me about two weeks ago," she began, nervously tapping a pencil as she spoke. "He was in the process of buying this quite expensive condominium and he needed to raise some cash for the down payment. He showed me this icon and I appraised it for him."

"Did he say where he got it?"

"He'd come from Russia and brought it with him. He implied he had several more, but I never saw them."

"Could they have been stolen?"

Rachel Dean shrugged. "The art scene in the former Soviet Union is very clouded at present. We are learning about paintings that we barely knew existed. Certainly there has been a great deal of theft, as there was during the Allied occupation of Germany."

Leopold loosened the wrapping. "This is the painting you examined?"

She leaned across the desk to take it from him. "It is. I believe it to be a representation of Saint John Chrysostom, though it's difficult to know for certain."

"Do you have a copy of your appraisal?"

She pulled open a file drawer next to the desk and took out a folder. "I have an extra copy you may have."

Leopold skimmed through it. *Appraisal of one Russian ikon measuring 6 1/2" by 8 1/2", being an encaustic painting on a wooden panel, possibly of St. John Chrysostom* . . . His eyes went to the bottom of the page. . . . *Estimated value—$400,000.*

He folded the copy and tucked it into his pocket. "What does encaustic mean?"

"Painted with wax colors that are then fixed with heat. It was a technique used on many of the early icons. The technique helps to date it to the sixth or seventh century, and that's what makes it so valuable. Very few icons exist that are this old."

"Were all early icons done that way?"

"No, some were mosaics—you know, with little inlaid stones, glass, or tiles—"

"Tiles?"

"Certainly. Tiles are nothing but baked clay, usually glazed or painted. The technique was known long ago."

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"Have you ever come across fake icons, with the painting or mosaic work made to appear much older than it is?"

"I never have, but I've read about such things. There are some people, especially in Eastern Europe, who are quite skilled at faking antique furniture and art objects."

"Do you think this icon could be faked?"

Rachel Dean shook her head. "I'd stake my reputation on its being authentic."

"You said he had more of them?"

"So he implied. He mentioned at least four which could be offered for sale, though I suggested it might be best to wait a bit before producing the other three."

"But he took this icon with him?"

She nodded. "I don't know why. Perhaps he wanted another opinion. Can you leave it with me now?"

"I'm afraid not. It's possible evidence in a murder case. Thank you for your help, Mrs. Dean."

"I'd appreciate your keeping me advised of the icon's fate."

"I'll try to do that," he promised.

Leopold returned the icon to Fletcher's office along with Rachel Dean's appraisal. Fletcher studied it and gave a soft whistle. "Four hundred thousand—that's motive enough for murder. We'd better lock this away in the evidence vault."

"I hope it helps with your investigation." He told Fletcher what he'd learned about the possible faking of mosaic icons.

"You're thinking of those tilers working at the condo, aren't you?"

Leopold nodded. "I may be on the wrong track, but if Vladimir Petrov was trying to fake an ancient mosaic he might seek the help of a skilled tile worker."

"There's one thing wrong with your theory," Fletcher said with a smile. "The only icon we've recovered so far isn't a mosaic. It's a wax—" He glanced again at the appraisal. "—encaustic painting."

Leopold stood up. "I'll leave that to you. Good luck with it."

"One more thing, if you're interested. Mrs. Petrov is in the interview room. Do you want to speak with her?"

"Sure, if you want me to. I've gone this far. I guess I can talk with one more person."

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Sally Petrov was not what he'd expected. For one thing, she was American, with a decidedly Brooklyn accent. Her tailored tan suit looked expensive, as did the wrist watch and rings she wore. "Have you found the killer?" she asked as soon as she entered the room.

"Not yet, Mrs. Petrov. We're working on it." He introduced himself and sat down opposite her. "I gather you met your husband in this country?"

She nodded. "About four years ago, after he'd emigrated here from Russia. He had an apartment in the Russian colony down near Coney Island. We were married within six months."

"He was a great deal older than you," Leopold observed.

"Well, yeah. I'm twenty-seven now and he was forty-seven, but twenty years isn't so bad. We were both interested in art. He'd collected some while he was in Russia and I'd posed a few times for a life class. That's where we met."

"I see." Leopold watched her nervously fidgeting with a gold bracelet on her wrist. "What can you tell me about the Russian icon we found in the trunk of your husband's car?"

"He brought it over with him, from Russia. There were four in all."

"What happened to the others?"

"I don't know. He told me he had six originally, part of an iconostasis—a large screen. He got them into the country past customs somehow, and he sold two soon after his arrival here. Certainly he had plenty of money when I first met him."

"I understand he was an art dealer in Manhattan."

"He didn't work much at it," Sally Petrov said, twisting her long brown hair back behind her shoulder.

"Do you know a local dealer named Rachel Dean?"

"Not personally, but he mentioned her. She did an appraisal on one of the icons for insurance purposes."

Leopold stood up. "Thanks for your time, Mrs. Petrov. I know this must be hard for you."

"Will I get the icon back?"

"You'll have to speak with Captain Fletcher about that."

Back in Fletcher's office the younger man asked, "What did you think of her?"

"She's a cool one," Leopold replied. "I think we could safely say she married him for his money."

"Maybe she killed him for it."

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"Is that your current theory?"

"I've got one other," Fletcher admitted. "Connie's free of her other case and we're going to check it out tonight. One of the workers on the tile crew, a fellow named Max Rosen, has a conviction for armed robbery. Served a few years for it back in the eighties. He's been clean since then but we figure he's worth a look."

Leopold glanced at his watch, surprised to see it was after five. "I'll be heading home. Give me a call if you need me for anything."

Molly was home before him, just slipping two frozen dinners into the microwave. "I was hoping you wouldn't be late," she said. "I'm starving."

"Hard day in court?" He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Not easy. I think I'm losing this one. How about you? What did Fletcher want?"

"He's short-handed. I'm helping him out on a case."

"Just like the old days."

"We'll see."

He could tell Molly was done in by her long day in court, with another session looming in the morning. They went to bed earlier than usual, just after eleven o'clock.

When the door chimes awakened him some time later, Leopold immediately looked at the glowing digits on the clock radio. It was 2:05. He slipped out of bed, trying not to disturb Molly from her sleep, and took his old .38 from the bedside drawer. As he went down the stairs he could see the red light flashing from the top of a waiting car.

He opened the door and faced Lieutenant Connie Trent, her face drained of color except for the pulsating red flasher that bathed them both.

"Connie?"

"I didn't know what to do. I had to come for you. Fletcher's been shot."

Molly came with them, because Fletcher was like one of the family. She threw on a bulky sweater and jeans and was in the car with Connie and Leopold within minutes. "What happened?" she asked Connie as they headed toward the hospital.

"Fletcher wanted to check out a man named Rosen who had a criminal record. He was working on the condo where Petrov

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was killed. We drove to Rosen's apartment over on Snyder Street, above a bodega. There was a back entrance, and as we approached it in the dark Fletcher saw someone moving. He drew his weapon and identified us as police. There were two quick shots and he went down—" Her voice broke as she said it. "I fired once but I couldn't see anything in the dark. Whoever it was got away. I ran to Fletcher and he was bleeding heavily from chest wounds."

"Wasn't he wearing his bulletproof vest?" Leopold asked.

"We weren't expecting trouble. You know Fletcher. Like most older cops, he hates those things."

"You never set him a very good example," Molly told her husband.

Connie swung her car into the hospital emergency room's parking lot and pulled the flashing red light from the roof of the unmarked vehicle. They hurried inside. "Captain Fletcher?" Connie asked the nurse behind the desk.

"The doctor will see you in a moment."

"I want to see someone now," Connie insisted.

"In a moment."

A greying man in a white coat appeared within five minutes. "I'm Dr. Slocum," he told them. "We're preparing Captain Fletcher for surgery now. His wife is with him."

"Can we see him?" Leopold asked.

"We've already put him under. I'm afraid you'll have to wait till later."

"What are his chances?"

Slocum glanced at the two women. "Good. Very good if I can dig those bullets out of him."

"We'll want them saved as evidence," Connie said, remembering her duty.

"Of course."

"How long do you expect the surgery to last?" Leopold asked.

"There's no telling. It should take a couple of hours, minimum."

He left them, disappearing through the swinging white doors, and Leopold asked, "Where do you stand on this Max Rosen?"

"I have a pickup order out on him, and the apartment is staked out, in case he comes back. We've no evidence he shot Fletcher, though, unless we find him with the weapon. As soon as the

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doctor recovers the slugs, we'll compare them to the bullets that killed Petrov."

Leopold knew Molly had to be in court, and he finally persuaded her to head home for a couple of hours' sleep, promising to phone her with any news. He and Connie had been waiting about an hour, comforting Fletcher's wife Carol as best they could, when the police commissioner arrived.

Commissioner Johnson was a tall black man with a voice as deep and commanding as that of James Earl Jones. He'd been appointed to the position just after Leopold's retirement and his honeymoon with the media had lasted a full year now. Those waiting for him to make a misstep were still waiting.

"How is he, Lieutenant?" he asked Connie.

"They have him in surgery now, Commissioner. The doctor says his chances are good."

"I'm glad to hear that." He turned to Leopold. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced. You're retired Captain Leopold?"

"That's right, sir. I'm pleased to meet you."

"I'd like to get your views on something, Captain. Would you pardon us please, Lieutenant?"

"Of course."

Johnson led him to an unoccupied corner of the waiting room, out of Connie's earshot. "This is an awkward place for a conversation, Captain, but I guess it's the best we can do. I'm aware that the violent crimes squad had staffing problems even before tonight. I approved Fletcher's reaching out to you for routine assistance on the Petrov case. Now I fear we have a more serious problem. At best, and with the full recovery we're all praying for, Captain Fletcher is likely to be out of action for two or three months. I can't let the department drift for that long. I need an acting head of violent crimes and I need him now. Would you consider coming out of retirement on a strictly limited basis?"

"Connie Trent could do the job," Leopold argued.

"A year from now, maybe. I'd like her to have a little more experience as a lieutenant first. There's no one else, and I know she works well with you."

Leopold took a deep breath. "For this case only?"

"I hope so. We'll know better once Fletcher is out of the woods."

"I can help you out for that long," Leopold agreed, wondering what Molly would say about it.

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"Thank you, Captain. I'm eternally grateful. As of this minute, you are acting head of the violent crimes division, with your old rank and pay scale." They shook hands and the commissioner said, "I should tell Lieutenant Trent."

Feeling a bit embarrassed, Leopold followed the commissioner back to where Connie was sitting. He was relieved to see her smile at the news. "That's the best thing I've heard all night. I'll call the squad room on my car radio and tell them the good news."

She went out to the car while Leopold and the commissioner spoke of technical matters involving the appointment. In a moment she was back, speaking quickly to Leopold. "Max Rosen walked into headquarters twenty minutes ago. He heard about the shooting at his apartment, and knew we'd want to see him. Spencer is talking with him now."

Leopold was on his feet. "You stay here till Fletcher is out of surgery, Connie. I'll talk to Mr. Rosen."

He didn't remember having seen Max Rosen among the few workers he'd spoken to at Vladimir Petrov's condominium. He was a middle-aged man of average height, with a short neatly trimmed beard. "My neighbor said you were looking for me," he told Leopold in the interrogation room. "I came in as soon as I heard. I bartend a few hours at night."

Leopold told Spencer to take a break and settled down opposite the bearded man. "Your record shows a conviction for armed robbery, Max. What about that?"

"I served my time. That's in the past. I've been living a new life for five years now."

"Do you own a gun?"

"I can't as a convicted felon."

"But do you?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know Vladimir Petrov?"

"Not really. Al Haskins was showing him our work one day and he told me it was a nice job. That's all the conversation I ever had with the man."

"He was killed with two shots from a nine-millimeter weapon, probably a pistol like police carry now." He placed an unloaded Glock on the table between them. "Ever seen a gun like that?"

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"Yeah, I see them on these TV cop shows all the time." He brushed back his sandy hair nervously. "Look, do you think I'd have come forward if I had anything to hide?"

"Maybe. Did Petrov ever mention any Russian icons to you?"

"I told you we barely spoke. I hardly knew the man."

Detective Spencer opened the door and said, "Captain, could I see you for a moment?"

Leopold went outside. "What's up?"

"Rosen gave us permission to search his apartment. Frawly just got back from looking it over. Want to see what he found?"

Spencer and Frawly were both new since Leopold's days with the department, but he'd known them both as patrolmen. Frawly was the younger and more excitable of the two. Right now he had reason to be excited. "Look at this, Captain! I found it hidden away at the back of a closet!"

Leopold watched while the detective unwrapped the soft cloth from around the wooden panel, knowing what it would be. "Another icon," he said, studying the painted angel with all the scrutiny of an art professor. "The technique seems similar to the first one."

"I guess that clinches it, Captain."

"I wish it did, Frawly. The man who shot Fletcher may have planted it to incriminate Rosen for Petrov's murder and been caught in the act when Connie and Fletcher arrived."

Max Rosen, of course, denied all knowledge of the icon, insisting it had been planted in his apartment. "Why would I agree to a search if I knew you'd find that?" he argued.

"Because you had no choice," Leopold countered. "You knew we'd get a court order anyway."

The questioning went on past dawn, and Leopold took a break to phone Molly before she left for court. He told her what he knew about Fletcher, and then what the commissioner had asked him to do.

"Is it what you want?" Molly asked softly.

"What I want is to have Fletcher back here. What I want is to find out who shot him."

"Let's talk about it later," she said.

Connie phoned from the hospital just before nine. "It was a long operation but he's going to make it, Captain. Both bullets are out and ballistics is already running tests. They're nine-millimeter, the same type that killed Petrov. I'm on my way in."

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"Go home and sleep for a while, Connie."

"I'm on my way in."

After Connie arrived, Leopold wrapped the icon in its soft cloth covering, identical to the cloth around the one in Petrov's trunk, and drove over to Rachel Dean's shop. He wanted confirmation that this one was the real thing too, and not some forgery. He couldn't imagine a killer sacrificing a valuable art work simply to frame someone else for the crime, but stranger things had happened.

The first thing he noticed when he pulled up in front of the shop was that the front door was standing slightly ajar. He stepped inside, calling out, "Mrs. Dean? Rachel Dean? It's Leopold."

There was no answer. He walked to the back office, tried the door, and found it locked. He could see light coming from under the door, but no one answered. Then he remembered the barred back window and went outside. He walked around to the rear of the row of shops and counted down until he found the window in question. Looking through the dirty glass, he saw Rachel Dean slumped over her desk. Breaking the window would have done no good with the bars still in place. He hurried around to the front of the shop and put in a call for help. When a patrol car arrived, two burly police officers helped him break down the locked door.

Rachel Dean was dead. She'd been shot in the chest, like the others. He looked around the office, at a blood-soaked handkerchief with which she'd tried to stanch the flow from the wound, at the pencil with which she'd tried to print a dying message: *ICON*.

Just that one word. She hadn't gotten any further.

Just before noon, Leopold faced Connie and Spencer and Frawly in the squadroom. He was working at one of the vacant desks, somehow reluctant to reclaim his old glass-enclosed office that now belonged to Fletcher. "We now have two murders and one close call. Happily, the news from the hospital is good. Fletcher is conscious after his surgery and the doctor says it looks good. What else do we have, Connie?"

"The bullets they removed from Fletcher came from the same gun that killed Vladimir Petrov, which is no great surprise. The one that killed Rachel Dean was a nine-millimeter too. We're

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after one killer, and those icons are the motives for the crimes."

"Any theories?"

She thought for a moment before responding. "From what we know, including what his wife Sally told you earlier, Petrov smuggled a half-dozen valuable Russian icons into this country five years ago. He sold two soon after his arrival, and when he decided to purchase the condominium at Bellview Sound Estates, he needed to sell some of the remaining four. Rachel Dean valued one at four hundred thousand dollars, but apparently didn't see the other three. I have two theories about what happened next. Petrov might have decided to keep a good thing going by faking some mosaic icons, approaching one of the condo's tilers for help." She smiled. "I got that idea from you, Captain. The other possibility is that someone simply killed him to steal the icons, and then shot Fletcher when he was caught leaving one of them at the Rosen apartment."

"Or else Rosen did it himself and is trying to appear innocent by coming in," Spencer suggested.

Leopold frowned. "How's the timing on that? Could he have killed Rachel Dean before he showed up here?"

Connie had the answer. "He walked in shortly before four A.M. The medical examiner estimates that Rachel Dean died around three, but keep in mind she was shot sometime earlier. She lived long enough to write that single word of her message. The killer shot Fletcher around twelve thirty-five. We got him to the hospital, and then I came over to get you, Captain. While I was doing that, the killer had plenty of time to go to Rachel's gallery and shoot her. Then, if it was Rosen, he showed up here before four."

"How do you explain the locked room?" Spencer asked. "She had to be alone when she was shot."

But Connie shook her head. "It sure wasn't suicide—no weapon and no powder burns. She let the killer in, probably arranged to meet him in the first place. What else would she be doing there in the middle of the night? She let him in, he shot her from across the room, and then he got out."

"Leaving the door locked behind him?"

That didn't stop Connie. "He may have been hiding someplace when the captain found the body—in a closet or under the desk."

But Leopold shook his head. "There's no closet in the room. The desk is out because, you'll remember, I had two officers help

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me break in the door. A hidden killer might have sneaked out past me, but not past three of us."

"So what do we do with Max Rosen?" Frawly asked.

"Turn him loose. We've been holding him for eight hours and we have no evidence to charge him."

But Connie objected. "The doctor thinks we might be able to speak with Fletcher for a few minutes this afternoon. We can hold Rosen till then, at least, in case Fletcher saw who shot him."

"All right," Leopold agreed. "Meanwhile, I want to speak with Al Haskins again. If Petrov approached any of the crew about doing some private tile work, he might know about it."

Leopold drove back out to the Bellview Sound Estates and waited at the gate while the guard recorded his name. "You know there's vacant land just east of here," he told the man. "Anyone could take a boat or even wade over and avoid the gatehouse."

The guard eyed him suspiciously. "Once the tenants move in, we'll have a beach patrol. No one will get by us."

"I hope not."

He found Al Haskins issuing instructions to a couple of his men after the lunch break. Haskins was not too pleased to see him. "What's this about you holding one of my men? Is he under arrest?"

"Max Rosen? We're just questioning him. He'll probably be released later this afternoon."

"I hope so. I need a full crew to finish up this job." He sent the others on their way and started back into the nearest doorway.

"Wait a minute," Leopold said. "I'd like to ask you a few more questions."

"I told you everything I know about Petrov's killing."

Leopold walked up to him so they wouldn't be overheard by the other workers. "Did he ever ask you or your crew about doing some personal jobs for him? Mosaic work?"

"Not me. I don't know about the others."

"Might he have asked Max Rosen?"

"Why do you keep harping on Max? I know he was in prison, but he served his time. He's trying to make a fresh start."

"We're just trying to find Petrov's killer. There was a second murder during the night, in case you haven't heard."

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There was a sudden sharpness in his eyes, visible even behind the glasses. "Did that detective die? I heard about it on the radio."

"No, this was an art dealer named Rachel Dean."

He nodded slowly. "I think she was up here with Petrov once. They were discussing the right paintings for his condo."

"Was that the only time you saw her?"

"I guess so. He usually came alone, or with his wife."

"Did Sally Petrov ever come here without him?"

"No. She seemed content to let him handle things. The only thing I remember her picking out were those Cleopatra tiles for the shower."

They were standing near one of the interior doors, and Leopold realized the locking mechanism was the same as the door to Rachel Dean's office—a round knob with a locking button in the middle. "Tell me something, Al. Do you know a way someone could gimmick this lock, walk out the door, and leave it locked from the inside?"

He shook his head. "You have to turn the knob to get out of the room, and turning the knob unlocks it. See?" He demonstrated for Leopold. "If you push the button while the door's open, it pops out when you shut it."

Leopold was convinced. "Thanks for your help."

He went back to his car and radioed in to Connie. "What time are you going to the hospital?"

"Right now, Captain. The doctor says we can see Fletcher for five minutes after three o'clock."

"I'll meet you there."

"I've got something for you. I know how that locked room trick was worked." She sounded pleased with herself.

"You do?"

"I'll tell you at the hospital."

Fletcher was awake, swathed in plastic tubes that ran to his arms and disappeared beneath the bedclothes. Another tube delivered oxygen to help him breathe. Leopold wondered if one of the bullets had nicked a lung. "How are you feeling, Fletcher?"

"Real dopey. Not much pain, though. Carol was in just before you two."

Leopold nodded. They'd spoken to his wife on the way in. She was his strength, and always had been. "Did you see who shot you?" Leopold asked.

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"No. Just a dark figure at the door. I thought it was Rosen." He turned his head slightly. "Connie, what's happening with the squad?"

"Don't you worry. The commissioner got Captain Leopold to lend us a hand till you're back on your feet."

Fletcher nodded just a speck. "You'll do it, Captain. You'll get the one who shot me."

"We'll get him, Connie and the rest of the squad. Rest easy now." He could see the nurse looming in the doorway.

Outside, down the hallway in the waiting room, Leopold said a few comforting words to Carol Fletcher. "He'll be out in no time, and back on the job."

She gave a weak smile. "Our son is flying in from California. He'll be here tonight."

"I'll be back then."

"Will you have the one who shot him?"

"Yes," Leopold promised.

Back in the car with Connie, he said, "Tell me about the locked room."

"It was so obvious we didn't see it. The killer shot her but she didn't die immediately. He left, and she held the handkerchief over her wound, struggling to the door to lock it in case he returned. Then she got back to her desk, tried to write a message, and died."

He took her hand and held it, smiling like a father to his daughter. "Connie, you'll make a great detective someday, but not yet. If it happened that way, why didn't she pick up the phone on her desk and call for help?"

"But—but there's no other explanation!"

"There is one. Rachel Dean told us herself, with her dying message—*ICON*. Think about it."

"I've *been* thinking about it! I don't see—"

"Give me your weapon, Connie."

"What?"

"The Glock you carry in your holster. Give it to me."

"What for?"

"It has to be tested by ballistics. You killed Rachel Dean, Connie, with your wild shot last night. It was Rachel who murdered Vladimir Petrov for those icons, Rachel who shot Fletcher when he caught her planting one in Rosen's apartment, Rachel who

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drove back to her office, dying, and started to write a confession. *ICON—I confess that I killed Vladimir Petrov.*"

By the time ballistics had confirmed Leopold's explanation that evening, he'd gone over it all with Connie. "I'll tell Fletcher tomorrow, but I want you to hear it from me first. You see, in a case full of icons we all leaped to the wrong conclusion. But it suddenly occurred to me that Rachel Dean couldn't have been writing *icon,* because she didn't spell it that way. On the copy of the appraisal she gave me, she used the alternate spelling, *ikon*. She was trying to write a longer word or sentence. I immediately thought of *I confess* and started looking for confirmation. Was there any? Yes, in the soft cloth used to wrap the icons. Rachel claimed she'd only seen the one recovered from Petrov's trunk, and that she'd wrapped it in that cloth herself to protect it. But when we found the second icon, hidden in Rosen's closet, it was wrapped in the identical soft cloth. It had obviously been in Rachel's possession and she'd lied about not seeing it."

"She was willing to sacrifice that valuable icon?"

"She still had two others, worth a fortune overseas, and I'm sure she left the least valuable one. Petrov must have mentioned once that an ex-con was working on the tiling crew and she decided he'd be the perfect fall guy for the murder. She crossed over from the adjoining property yesterday without being seen, met Petrov, and shot him. If anyone had seen her, she would simply have postponed the crime. She had the other three icons in her possession for appraisal, and must have known Petrov hadn't told his wife where they were."

"When I shot her—"

"She'd just planted the angel icon in Rosen's closet. Leaving the apartment after midnight, she suddenly saw you and Fletcher. She shot him, but your return shot in the dark hit her in the chest. She escaped back to her car, holding a handkerchief to the wound. It must not have seemed too bad at first. She drove to the gallery to patch herself up, then sat in her locked office for two hours feeling her life drain away from the internal bleeding. She couldn't call for help without revealing herself as Fletcher's assailant. Finally, in her last moment of life, she picked up her pencil and started to write a confession."

It had been a long day. Connie looked at him and said, "It's good to have you back, Captain, even for a little while." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

TIGER COUNTRY

by Michael Gilbert

Clive Brocklehurst and his wife no longer shared a bed, but they shared everything else in their lives and had done so for more than thirty happy years. It was only after Laura's second, and more serious, attack of asthma that Clive had retreated to the dressing room.

On that morning in early October Laura had been lying awake for some minutes when she heard her husband getting out of bed and leaving the dressing room by the far door. Her sleepy mind registered two things. First, that it was unusually early for him to be stirring. Being the senior partner in the firm of Brocklehurst and Garigan, Accountants of London Wall, he normally got up for a leisurely breakfast at eight o'clock and was rarely out of the house before nine.

The second thought was that he had left his room so quickly that he could not have had time to do more than throw on his

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clothes. Usually he was a careful and meticulous dresser. Then she heard the front door of the house opening and shutting softly. Some minutes passed. Where could he be going? She remembered that on one occasion, when she had forgotten to replenish her asthma medicine, he had slipped out to the chemist in the village, who lived over his shop, and had extracted a new bottle from him. That was the sort of thing he did for her.

Then she heard the car starting up.

After listening for a few minutes she got out of bed, put on dressing gown and slippers, went downstairs and out into the garden.

Named a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America in 1986, Michael Gilbert has been a prominent figure in the world of crime fiction for more than forty years. His range in the genre is extraordinary. He can create with equal dependability a police procedural, a pure whodunit, a thriller, or a spy story. Often his stories meld elements of these various subgenres to create something uniquely his own. ✝

The car seemed to have been running for a long time. As she approached she could hear the engine thudding away. When she tried to open the garage door she found that it was not only shut, but seemed to have been bolted on the inside. She wasted a few minutes clawing at it. Then turned, ran back to the house and grabbed the telephone.

The local policeman—there was only one in the village—had been out most of the night before watching for poachers, but the panic in her voice ultimately stirred him into action.

"Come quickly, please."

"Sounds as if the door's jammed. If it is, I'll have to bring tools to break it down."

"Quick, quick."

"Quick as I can, ma'am."

When he had succeeded, twenty agonising minutes later, in getting the door down, he was surprised that the garage was not full of exhaust fumes. Until he saw the piece of rubber hose, one end wired to the exhaust pipe, the other end tucked into the rear window of the car.

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* * *

Francis Fearne said to his partner, Bob Bracknell, "Of all the people in the world I should not have expected to take their own lives, I'd have put Clive Brocklehurst near the top of the list."

"You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

"Very well indeed. We qualified in the same year. Clive as an accountant, I as a solicitor. We were members of the same club and partnered each other in a lot of inexpert bridge. And we shared a rough—a very rough—shoot in Sussex." He looked regretfully out of the window. It was a perfect day. With the weather like that, how often had they played truant from their offices and enjoyed themselves almost as much as the rabbits, pigeons, and pheasants whose numbers they never seriously diminished.

"You're his executor, of course."

"Yes."

"Have you seen Laura since it happened?"

"I telephoned her as soon as I heard the news. The doctor answered the phone. He said that she was in no condition to talk. I left it for twenty-four hours, rang again, and found that the telephone had been disconnected."

"So?"

"So I'm going round to see what's happening. I'll get Tara to drive me. There are a lot of things I need to know. She can take notes. Addresses of relatives. Insurance details. Where he kept his private bank account. And—well—"

"And," said Bracknell after a long pause.

"And some hint, some sort of clue to explain what can have driven a man who was healthy, as far as I knew—and comfortably off financially—I'm sure of that—to do what he did."

"Yes," said Bracknell. "One would like to know that."

When Fearne reached the Brocklehurst house he found the doctor on guard downstairs. His opening words were, "It's a bad case. As bad as any I've had to deal with. I felt it my duty to get a second opinion. Since the trouble seemed to be more mental than physical, I needed a neurologist or a psychiatrist. Fortunately I knew the ideal man and he happened to be available. He's with Mrs. Brocklehurst now."

Fearne's heart sank. Like all lawyers, he distrusted psychiatrists. He had heard too many of them contradict each other in the witness box.

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"Which member of the tribe is this?"

"Dr. Sampson. George Sampson. I believe he's generally considered—"

"No need to tell me about him," said Fearne. The relief in his voice was apparent. "You couldn't have anyone better."

George Earle Sampson was a qualified doctor and a psychiatrist. He rarely appeared in court and, when he did, spoke the truth as he saw it in simple language. Fearne had briefed him more than once, was confident of his ability and his integrity. Later that morning he listened carefully to what Dr. Sampson had to tell him.

"I gather," he said, "that Mrs. Brocklehurst was not a very strong character, but there is no question that she was totally devoted to her husband. He was her prop. Without him she is, for the time being, helpless and adrift. It is not an uncommon case, but there are one or two things in it which are not usual. For instance, she seems frightened of authority. Particularly of male authority. Anybody who might seem to usurp the place of the husband she has lost. If she was questioned by a policeman or by a senior lawyer, even a good one like you—"

"Thank you," said Fearne.

"—she would retreat at once into herself. If you persisted, she would probably break down entirely."

"You mean she would become insane?"

"Temporarily. Yes."

Fearne thought about it, unhappily. He said, "Someone will have to talk to her sooner or later. I can get most of the information I need immediately from his secretary. But there are other things—more important things—that I can only get from her."

"Then let me make a suggestion. Is that attractive young lady I saw in your car a member of your staff?"

"She is a member of my staff. She's a qualified solicitor. She is also my daughter. Why?"

"I have a feeling that Mrs. Brocklehurst might talk to another woman—ultimately. Suppose that your daughter started with a few unimportant routine matters and then moved on, slowly, to a more personal approach. Is she capable of that sort of manoeuvre?"

"When she was younger," said Fearne, "she had no difficulty in twisting *me* round her little finger."

"Good. Let's try it, anyway."

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"You said there were other things you noticed."

"Yes," said Dr. Sampson. He seemed, for a moment, unwilling to go on. "I'll tell you something, if I have your undertaking to pass it on to no one else. I have no clear proof of its truth, and if I'm wrong about it, it might have a terrible boomerang effect. But since it may help you, you shall have it. Somewhere, in her poor old muddled mind, there is a feeling of *guilt*. She thinks she was, or may have been, responsible for what's happened. Which means—if your Latin is up to it—*festina lente.*"

"Step at a time," agreed Fearne. "The secretary first."

Mr. Brocklehurst's secretary, Miss Sharpe, was a sensible middle-aged woman who had been with him for ten years and knew almost as much about his business as he did himself. She was able to supply, without difficulty, the factual details that Fearne wanted. It was only when he touched on the second part of his enquiry that her replies became hesitant.

She said, "It's true. And I'd noticed it. He had been worried."

"For how long?"

"I should say, perhaps, for two months. More or less."

"Did it start with anything in particular? A letter. Something like that."

"Most of his mail came to the office and I saw it before he did."

"Might it have been a letter he got at home?"

Miss Sharpe thought about this. Then she said, "I don't think it was a letter at all. I think it started with a telephone call. A man rang up, said it was personal, and I put it through to Mr. Brocklehurst. A few minutes later he came into my room—he hadn't cut the caller off—and sent me out to get some cigarettes. Quite unnecessarily. He had a boxful on his desk. Then he must have gone back to continue taking the call."

"An unusual precaution."

"Unheard of," said Miss Sharpe. "I was completely in his confidence. Or had been until then."

"And it was after this that he started worrying."

"Yes. And there were more calls. Carefully timed, on each occasion, to take place when I was out at lunch. I asked the girl on the exchange to make a note of the caller's name—"

"Let me guess. It was Mr. Smith."

"Robinson, actually. You think someone was blackmailing him?"

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"I certainly had the possibility in mind."

"Then I can assure you of one thing. If it was blackmail, the blackmailer wasn't paid."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Mr. Brocklehurst had only one personal bank account. As his executor, you'll need the account sheets, and I've got them out for you. They go back for six years. You can see from them that he was as open about money matters as about everything else in his life. Until—"

"Until he got that phone call."

"Yes. But even after that, you'll find no sign of large or unusual transactions."

"Thank you," said Fearne. "I'll take those sheets with me, if I may. One other thing. I'd like to look through his files."

"All of them?"

"I don't mean client files. Personal ones."

"I'm glad you didn't mean client files," said Miss Sharpe, with the ghost of a smile creasing her severe mouth. "Because we've three filing cabinets full of them. There are quite a few personal files, too." She was opening a fourth cabinet. "How far back would you like to go?"

"Three or four years will be enough to start with. If I want more, I'll let you know."

To his partner, Bob Bracknell, Fearne said next morning, "Clive might, of course, have had a second bank account somewhere, but I'm damned if I can see where it would have been funded from. His only income was his share of partnership profits, and as you can see, they were credited to this account every quarter. And it's quite clear that he has drawn no large sums out in the last four years."

"But it's obvious these phone calls were threats of some sort. If blackmail wasn't behind them, what was?"

"I can think of one plausible motive. Hatred. Someone hated Clive so much that they didn't want money. They didn't want Clive to buy himself out of whatever mess he'd got into. They were going to watch him wriggle and enjoy every moment of it."

Bob thought about this. He respected his senior partner's instinct, honed in a hundred skirmishes in the jungle of the law. He said, "If you're right, it's going to be devilish difficult to locate

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this chap. And even more difficult to deal with him when you find him."

"I'll deal with him. Be sure of that," said Fearne. Bob thought he had never seen him looking so savage. "However, I think the time has come to hand over to the second eleven."

He referred, in this disparaging way, to his daughter, Tara, and Bob's son, Hugo, who, with their managing clerk, old Horace Piggin, made up the operative side of the firm.

To Tara he said, "I've got one or two papers that need Mrs. Brocklehurst's signature. That should enable you to get alongside her. And once you get there, stay there."

Tara accepted this vague and irregular commitment without surprise or dissent.

To Hugo he said, "I want you to read through these personal files."

"All of them?"

"You can start with the last three years. And check them against the bank statements. There'll be occasions when he bought someone a present and was thanked for it. Quite clear?"

"It's clear what you want me to do. But it would help if you'd tell me what we're looking for."

"Hatred," said Fearne.

A fortnight later Hugo turned over the last page of the third large file. He had to do most of his reading in the evening, after a fairly demanding day's work. The figure emerging from the files was an agreeable one. Hating nobody and hated by nobody. A man at peace with himself and his wife. There was a regular payment into her account, for household expenses. The only other sizeable payments were his club fees and his half share in the shoot. It was clear that he was earning more than he spent and there were regular transfers to his deposit account. The deposit bank sheets also were available. They showed only payments in. No withdrawals.

When he reported his lack of success, Fearne said, "Go back three years more. There's something buried there. I can smell it."

Tara was unsympathetic. She said, "It's all right for you. You can do your work in the office or at home. You don't have to sit for hours holding an old lady's hand and wondering if she'll be alive when you go back next."

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"Alive? What makes you think—?"

"I found that she'd got hold of two bottles of aspirin and a full bottle of sleeping pills and hidden them in the cupboard beside her bed. I saw them when she was out of the room for a moment. And something else with them. Her husband used an old fashioned cut-throat razor. That was there, too."

"Good God!" said Hugo. "Shouldn't you tell someone?"

"No. I don't think she'll kill herself. Not now. The shock's wearing off and she's getting more rational. But whatever you do, don't tell Dad. He'd have a fit. Promise me."

Hugo promised. But very unwillingly.

During those weeks they both—Tara in particular—found Mr. Piggin a great help in keeping an eye on their matters: dealing with occasional crises and keeping the wheels turning. He said to Hugo, "Keep it up. It doesn't matter how long it takes—give the old man the lead he wants and he'll sniff out the truth." He added, "If I'd done something to upset him and I knew he was after my blood, do you know what I'd do? I'd emigrate."

October died in glory and turned into a chilly November. Tara had established a friendly relationship with Mrs. Brocklehurst's housekeeper, Mrs. Vicarage, who attended to Laura's personal needs, while Tara herself dealt with business matters. This was largely a question of paying the household bills. There were not a great number of them, but she had come to the end of the current cheque book and suggested writing to the bank for a new one.

Laura said, "Now you mention it, I remember on the morning—on the morning it happened—there was a letter from the bank. It was probably a new cheque book. I put it in Clive's desk—"

Tara went downstairs to Clive's study. She had never been in the room before. It was cold and dusty and seemed to be mourning for its previous occupant. She found the envelope from the bank in one of the pigeonholes in the desk. There was a new cheque book in it. Something else too, which came out with it. Bank passbook sheets for the last quarter. She looked at them for a moment, then picked up a piece of paper and started to scribble. Then she poked the sheets back into the envelope behind the cheque book and went upstairs, on legs that felt oddly weak.

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* * *

"Do you think she knew you'd seen these bank-account sheets?" said her father.

"I don't think so. She got the cheque book out without looking at them. If I thought she had seen them—well, I can only tell you that I'd left the door ajar."

"Why? Do you think she'd be violent? Her preparations, surely, were for suicide, not murder."

"Then Hugo told you? He'd promised not to—"

"Of course he told me. As soon as he thought about it, he realised he had got to. And don't talk about promises. We're not playing nursery games. Now, about those statements. You got it all down accurately, I hope."

"I think so," said Tara faintly. She'd never seen her father in that mood before and it frightened her.

"On September first she drew a cheque for five thousand pounds in favour of stockbrokers Welsby and Grintham. There wasn't a lot of money in the account, so she must have deposited the share certificate or contract note or whatever with the bank as security for a temporary loan. Then on September fifteenth she paid in six thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds, discharged the loan, and was credited with the profit—one thousand, two hundred and fifty?"

"Can you do something like that?"

"Easily. If you have inside information. Now, let's think. You'd better keep clear of the Brocklehurst house for a bit. If we need anything, we'll send in Mr. Piggin. He has a very calming effect on hysterical women." Noting the look on his daughter's face, he added, "Cheer up. I doubt if anyone could have done better than you did. Or as well."

At eleven o'clock that same night Hugo closed the sixth personal file, which he had just finished, rubbed his eyes, and opened them again. Yes. Surely. There *had* been something. He had been so sleepy that, at first reading, he had missed it.

It was the carbon copy of a letter from Clive to Rupert Maxwell, the senior partner of the internationally known firm of City solicitors, Mayne, Maxwell, and Freudenger. They were evidently old friends.

"Dear Rupert, If you want my advice, as an accountant, I'd say no to Welling. You say that he's a clever chap. All right. I accept your word for that. What makes me doubt whether he's

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really fitted to be finance manager to a firm of your standing is that he appears to be totally unqualified. He calls himself an accountant. Anyone can so describe himself. But I'd prefer to see the letters F.C.A. or F.C.C.A. or even F.C.M.A. after a man's name before I put him into such an important post."

When he saw the letter next morning, Fearne said, "Well played the second eleven." He told Bob what Tara had discovered. "Plenty of grounds there for Welling hating Clive. *If* he saw the letter. Which he could only have done if he was working, in some capacity, at Mayne, Maxwell, and Freudenger at the time. It's an enormous outfit, with a rapid turnover of junior staff, so it's quite possible that he was. We'll get Mr. Piggin moving on that side of it. Meanwhile, it's about time I had a word with Clive's partner."

Sam Garigan said, "You can count on me, of course. Any help I can give you, you've only to ask. I'm still shaken when I think of what Clive was driven to. Ghastly. Do you know, a few days before it happened, we gave him a little party to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of him joining the firm. And he seemed so happy and relaxed."

"He was a very self-controlled man," said Fearne. "I doubt if anyone, even his wife, had any idea of what was happening. What I want you to do now is to let me have a list of all the companies your firm acts for, leaving out small private companies."

"Even without them it will be quite a long list. But you shall have it."

"Right. Then I want you to mark on it any companies that have had capital dealings in the last six months. I mean takeovers, or being taken over. Increases or reductions of capital. Rights issues. Bonus issues. Anything like that."

"There won't be many of them."

"Good," said Fearne. He thought for a moment and then said, "At that party you gave for Clive, were there any presents?"

Garigan said, with some surprise, "Only two. The firm gave him a set of golf clubs, and his wife gave him a camera. A very fine modern one. He was a keen photographer and was mighty pleased with it."

"It would have cost a lot of money?"

"A fair amount, yes."

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"As much as one thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds?"

"Could be. But, forgive me, I hardly see how this information is going to help you."

"It fills out the picture," said Fearne. He added, "The fact is that I'm tracking a jackal, in very thick country. I can see his paw marks and I'm beginning to hope that with the help I am getting—" he smiled gratefully at Garigan, "I may soon sight him. When I do, I'll skin him and nail his hide up on the wall."

After which the pace slackened for some weeks, while Mr. Piggin pursued his molelike activities.

He knew many of the managing clerks and senior office staffs in the City offices. He stood a great many drinks and, in important cases, a few lunches. He knew that it was no use being impatient. If he listened carefully and waited long enough, the great sounding board of the east central district would transmit to him the message he wanted. It reached him in the bar of the Falstaff, when he was talking to a retired stockbroker's clerk.

He reported to Fearne. "Welling's your man. Not a shadow of doubt about it. Four years ago he had a temporary job with Mayne, Maxwell. He was being considered for a permanent job, but for some reason he didn't get it. When it was clear that he wasn't going to—that letter you showed me must have tipped the balance—he seems to have behaved like the unjust steward in the Bible. Feathered the nest he planned to occupy. He gave a number of useful tips to a not very large or respectable firm of stockbrokers, Welsby and Grintham. When Rupert Maxwell heard about it and kicked him straight out, he got a job with them and has been there ever since. Not a patch on the job he lost, but better than nothing, I suppose."

"So that's the truth of it," said Fearne. "He must have seen that letter when he was at Maxwell's—some secretarial indiscretion—and realised who had ditched him. So what does he do? Nothing, for a bit. Then he scrapes acquaintance with Laura Brocklehurst. She's a sociable type. Got a certain way into her confidence. Bided his time. The chance he'd been waiting for came when she wanted to give her husband an extra-special present. He told her she could make a few hundred pounds—maybe a thousand—by buying and selling Kadmack shares."

"The engineering firm?" said Bracknell.

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"That's the one. Brocklehurst and Garigan acted for them. They were on the list Sam gave me. They were in the middle of an amalgamation with Afro-Engines. When it came off, both lots of shares were going to go up. I needn't say that Clive, who was organising the amalgamation, wouldn't have touched the shares himself. And if he'd known that Laura was going to, he'd have warned her off. But that was where Welling was so clever. Clive wasn't to be told. The whole thing was to be a surprise. And I guess he reckoned that the transaction was too small for the Stock Exchange Surveillance Department to worry about it."

"Large or small," said Bracknell, "if it had come out, it would have been assumed that Clive had tipped his wife off and they'd both have been in dead trouble, every way round. Insider dealing is a social as well as a legal crime nowadays."

Fearne said, "It was the trouble coming to Laura that was in his mind when he switched on the car that morning. He knew that once he was out of the way, Welling wouldn't move again."

"Why should he? He'd done what he set out to do, the nasty little sod. So now that we know, what do *we* do?"

"We tell the whole story. To people we can trust."

"Trust not to pass it on, you mean."

"On the contrary, people we can trust to pass it on."

"We'll have to ask them to be a bit discreet about where they got it from."

"Yes. But not too discreet," said Fearne.

And so, in the exclusive luncheon clubs, in the not-so-exclusive drinking clubs, and in the entirely inexclusive sandwich bars, the story spread. Most people knew about Clive Brocklehurst's death. Many of them had liked and respected him. When they heard the true story—on the unimpeachable authority of Francis Fearne—their indignation and their dislike for the perpetrator grew with each telling.

The City is a close community; in many ways as close and as prejudiced as a boarding school. Physical retaliation was out of the question, but there were other, more subtle and equally hurtful ways of expressing their feelings.

The luncheon club to which Welling belonged—it had taken him five years to procure his membership—had a simple method of preserving its tone and standing. Under the club rules, a fresh application for membership had to be made every year. Normally it was accepted as a matter of course. In Welling's

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case it was refused. "Very sorry. Pressure of new members," said the secretary.

Welling, his indignation mixed with a less comfortable feeling, spoke to Mr. Grintham, the partner for whom he did most of his work.

"It's a scandal," he said. "Pressure of new members. Why should new members be preferred to me?"

Mr. Grintham, looking at him over the top of his rimless glasses, said, "Do you really not know why they ousted you?"

"I know that Fearne's been spreading some lying story about me. I didn't know that anyone believed it."

"They not only believe it," said Mr. Grintham coldly, "they're beginning to react to it. I suppose you noticed that we had lost two of our best clients recently. Again, no reason given. Companies are free to choose what brokers act for them. But off the record and from remarks that have been made to me, I've no doubt at all. It's a sign of displeasure *because you work for us.* Also because it was through this firm that the purchase and sale were made, which is true, of course. We can't deny the fact."

"It's quite true," said Welling. "I handled it myself. Mrs. Brocklehurst is an old acquaintance of mine. She asked me to do it. Explained that she wanted to raise a little cash for a present to her husband. I saw no reason to refuse."

"Why did she choose Kadmack?"

"She said she had a feeling they were going up. A woman's instinct. You know what they're like."

"Then the whole idea was hers, not yours?"

"Yes."

"You're absolutely sure about that?"

"Absolutely. Why?"

"Because, as a measure of protection for the firm—and for you, of course—I have already spoken to George Capel. You know who I mean?"

"The Q.C."

"Right. A specialist in defamation. I told him the whole story. And I asked him, if we brought an action for slander against Fearne, would we have a case that would stand up, and would he act for us. You know how counsel shy away from slander cases. In the end he said he thought we would have a convincing case and that he would act for us, subject to two points. The first was that there appeared to be no reason why you should

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have trapped Mrs. Brocklehurst in the way Fearne was suggesting. What was the suggested *motive* for the steps you took? Had you any reason to dislike Brocklehurst?"

"None at all. I've never had any dealings with him, professional or social. Apart from the fact that he was Laura Brocklehurst's husband, I hardly knew of his existence."

"Good. That should help a jury to make up its mind. Counsel's second point was a very simple one. Fearne is saying that you suggested the sale and purchase to Mrs. Brocklehurst. You say that the suggestion came from her. Two different stories. Which of them is true?"

Before Welling could answer, Mr. Grintham leaned forward and said, "If it was put to Mrs. Brocklehurst, would she support you?"

Welling said, picking his words carefully, "She's not in a very good state of health at the moment. In fact, her mind's said to be going. If it was put to her, her first reaction might be to say that she'd forgotten all about it."

"But if she was pressed—reminded of the precise circumstances in which the conversation took place—"

"Yes. I think she'd admit that the suggestion came from her."

"Then ask her."

"Personally?"

"Why not? You're an old friend. Even if she's bedridden, surely you'd be allowed in to see her."

"I imagine so. Mrs. Vicarage knows me. But if Laura says—what we want her to say—shouldn't I have a witness with me?"

"She'd be more likely to speak freely if you were on your own. But there's no reason you shouldn't take a tape recorder with you."

When Albert Welling was ushered into her bedroom by Mrs. Vicarage and the door had closed behind her, Laura experienced such a feeling of relief and joy that it almost overwhelmed her. It was something she had hoped for and prayed for without really expecting it to happen.

Her hand slid down into the narrow space between the far side of her bed and the wall and her fingers caressed the stock of Clive's shotgun.

She drew it up quite slowly.

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When Welling saw it, his first instinct was to try to grab it. Then he changed his mind and made for the door. As he was trying to open it, Laura, resting the gun on the rail at the foot of her bed, discharged both barrels into the small of his back.

"Did you guess he'd come to see her?" said Bracknell. "And did you know she'd got hold of Clive's gun?"

"No to both questions," said Fearne. "I'm not a prophet or a mind reader. One thing I do know. We shall have to get busy now organising her defence."

"She'll get a lot of sympathy from the jury," said Bracknell. ●

Solution To The Mystery Crossword

G	A	B	■	■	E	B	B	S	■	C	R	O	S	S
E	L	O	N	■	D	R	A	T	■	H	I	D	E	S
S	O	L	O	■	G	A	L	A	■	O	D	E	T	S
T	H	E	B	L	A	C	K	B	I	R	D	■	■	■
E	A	R	H	A	R	T	■	■	C	E	L	L	A	R
■	S	O	I	F	■	S	A	N	E	■	E	A	S	E
■	■	■	L	O	S	■	S	O	M	A	■	L	I	T
K	I	L	L	I	N	G	T	H	E	G	O	O	S	E
A	C	E	■	S	E	A	R	■	N	E	V	■	■	■
T	E	S	S	■	E	L	O	I	■	N	E	N	E	■
E	R	S	A	T	Z	■	■	S	E	C	R	E	T	E
■	■	■	T	H	E	D	I	R	T	Y	D	U	C	K
C	H	A	I	R	■	A	R	A	H	■	I	T	H	E
B	O	R	N	E	■	S	M	E	E	■	D	E	E	R
S	E	N	S	E	■	H	A	L	L	■	■	R	D	S

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In All Honesty
BY RUTH RENDELL

All Keyed Up
BY GEORGE BAXT

Home Is the Place Where
BY BILL PRONZINI

The Theft of the Campaign Poster
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

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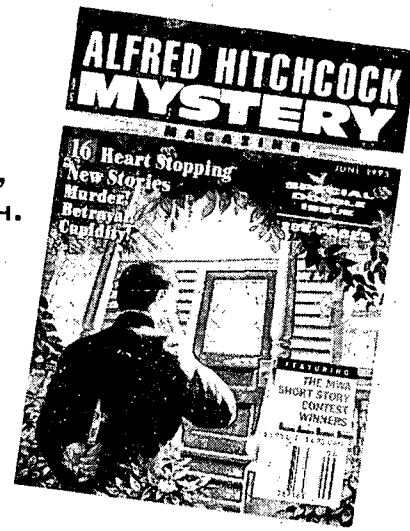

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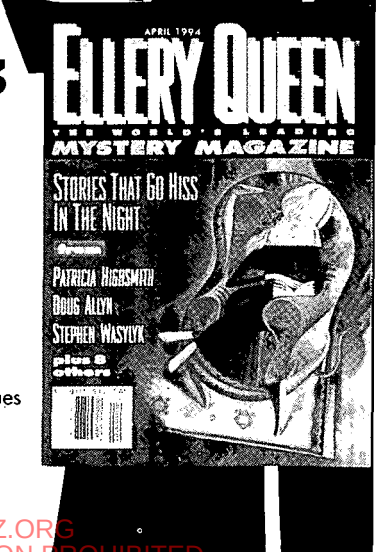

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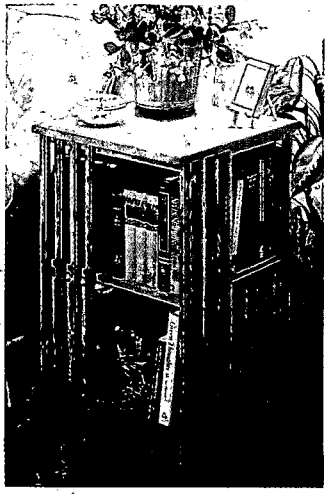

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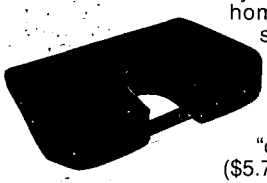

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